Submission to the ERA Review

Arthur Sale, 22 April 2013
Emeritus Professor of Computer Science

Status of submission

This is an individual submission by

Emeritus Professor Arthur Sale

127 Tranmere Road, Howrah Tasmania 7018

(03) 6247 1331 or 04 1947 1331

ahjs@ozemail.com.au or Arthur.Sale@utas.edu.au

Principal argument

Analysis of the ERA

The ERA is a bureaucratic exercise whose overall value to the country is difficult to determine accurately. It has the following good effects:

- It provides quality information regarding research in the university sector.

- It encourages universities to specialize in areas of research strength, and to build them up to 5-star rating (but not necessarily higher).

- It encourages universities to abandon research ambitions in areas of poor research performance, which are unlikely to improve or be improved.

The following bad effects are also evident:

- Intensive game-playing by universities to maximize ERA score, resulting in wasted use of funds

- High cost to the country, albeit distributed across the ARC and universities

- Wasted resources at department level going into maximizing ERA scores rather than productivity or quality in research

- Quantity information is absent in the ERA, and relies on the HERDC data collection

- Comparison with non-university research sector is absent

This submission argues that the ERA has an opportunity to add to its good effects and reduce the bad effects, by a few simple decisions that will drive the universities to respond. The general public will feel vindicated, universities will save scarce funds, and Australia will contribute to open access globally.

The aim is to build on the good work of ARC and NH&MRC in requiring all publications derived from funded grants to be made open access as soon as possible. This is a potential game-changer, though

it is clear that universities are not taking these policies to heart, and are instead setting up yet more bureaucracies to track ARC and NH&MRC grant recipients and ensure that they (and they alone) comply with the new policies, instead of understanding the message. The recent *Agenda for Higher Education 2013-2016* by Universities Australia indicates this clearly when it complacently writes in its proposed actions:

> "To increase the visibility of university outputs and make them more useful for the broader community, universities will include metadata on research publications in their institutional repositories and will expand the proportion of full text publications available to 50% by 2030."

This is well beyond the tenure of any Vice-Chancellor presently in office and can conveniently be forgotten since it is in the far future. It is a complete fob-off and highly regrettable.

Cutting costs and Public benefit

My proposal is that ERA announce a policy regarding eligibility of publications for ERA assessment as follows. The statements are based on a blend of existing ARC and NH&MRC grant policies (mostly good) and the parallel decisions by the UK in the RCUK's policy statement regarding open access and REF. This latter leads to some modification of the Australian position for consistency.

1. Only publications whose full text is lodged in an institutional repository, and is either open access or scheduled to be automatically made open access in compliance with the next requirement, will be eligible to be cited in support of ERA submissions after 1 January 2016

2. Books and book chapters, and research outputs other than journal and conference artices, are exempt from the open access requirement, but not the lodgement requirement. Journal and conference articles must be made open access as soon as possible, but no later than six months after publication for biological and medical articles, one year for other sciences, and two years for the humanities and fine arts. Either the final draft (NISO term: AM or Accepted Manuscript) or the published form (NISO term: VoR or Version of Record) is acceptable.

3. If an article is published with open access, then a repository entry with full metadata and a link to the open access version of the full text is acceptable in meeting the requirement. A copy of the full-text is not required.

4. The ARC will move to eliminating HERDC metadata collection, and ERA RODA full text collection, from 1 January 2016, instead harvesting the data direct from university repositories.

5. Universities are responsible for ensuring compliance. Non-compliance may cause omission from the ERA.

Notes:

a. Point 1 will ensure that all universities move to collect *all* research outputs in their repositories. My research (http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_10/sale/index.html) shows that it will take 2-3 years to be fully effective, so 1 January 2016 is a realistic date. This is after the next ERA round, but the notice is inescapable. HERDC can be automated after this date.

b. The general public will applaud this step as will Australian industry. It should be announced as a public benefit. Australian research will regain a leadership position in open access it has largely lost in the last five to ten years.

c. The failure to collect research data is a failure of community accountability by universities. It could not be contemplated in teaching (imagine not keeping records of student achievement?).

d. There are no unresolved issues with respect to journal and conference articles, but the book area needs some time to discuss. Actually few research books achieve royalty payments, but books involve individual contracts with royalty clauses.

e. Point 2 mirrors the recently announced RCUK policy, which is probably better than in this respect than the ARC's current policy.

f. Point 3 is ARC policy, and is sensible in avoiding extra work when not necessary.

g. Point 4 picks up on Universities Australia aim (automation of HERDC) but extends it. It offers the promise of productivity improvement in the sector by not wasting resources on a requirement which can be automated.

h. It may be useful to foreshadow a spot audit of repository data for compliance in March 2016.

i. The scheme is potentially extendible to CSIRO, DSTO (non-security), and private industry.

Addressing the Review questions

It is not my aim to address these questions directly, as they are mostly addressed to institutions. However the following may be useful. Questions on which I do not want to comment, or do not feel competent to comment, are omitted.

3. Did you experience any issues adding resource outputs to your institutional repository?

Of course not. Nobody could complain about that. Repository software is very stable now and very functional after a decade of relative stability. It needs to have included if not already done, like UTas five years ago, ANZSRC coding such as FoR, SEO, etc..

4. Would you consider the use of unique researcher IDs as part of future ERA submissions?

It is absolutely essential, and should (a) be integrated with global registration, and (b) encompass honorary researchers as well as current employees. Compatibility with the UK is essential, and as developed, with the USA.

13. Do you have any suggestions on other ways in which the ERA process could further improve the quality of submitted data and information?

Eliminate the game-playing and wasted effort. All it does is evaluate mangement, not research quality. Automate data collection.

14. The ARC is considering moving to only electronic certification. Do you agree with this, or do you have any concerns?

Inevitable and desirable. Preferably automated as well with eliminated extra effort, and

savings to the whole sector.

28. Would you have an objection if all the submission data to the 2015 ERA exercise were, subsequent to the completion of the evaluation process made publicly available?

- If not, what are the issues that would prevent this?

Even if there were overwhelming objection by universities, as a member of the public I would expect no less. It is my money that pays for their activity.

30. Do you agree or disagree with expanding the option of submitting 'non-traditional outputs' such as policy documents or commissioned research to all disciplines (this was trialled in ERA 2012)?

Agree. Obvious.

33. Do you have any other issues regarding the ERA 2012 process that you wish to raise with the ARC?

See main submission part.