



24th June, 2016

BioMelbourne Network Response

NISA Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper

The BioMelbourne Network welcomes the opportunity to contribute this submission in response to the NISA Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper

The BioMelbourne Network is an industry forum for leaders in biotechnology, medical technology, pharmaceutical and healthcare innovation in the state of Victoria. Our role is to foster links between companies, research organisations, financial markets and government, fostering an environment for greater collaboration and prosperity. With 185 members, including leading universities, medical research institutes, hospitals, biotechnology, medical technology, pharmaceutical and life science companies, BioMelbourne Network plays a critical role in connecting health, research and industry capabilities and supporting the growth of Melbourne's bioeconomy. The BioMelbourne Network's focus is local and our reach is global. The ultimate success of our members is built upon a strong foundation of research and development, and a competitive innovation ecosystem in Australia.

There are economic and social benefits for Australia that are directly derived from Government investment in academic research, particularly in the field of health and medical research. The value of these benefits can only be realised through the translation of knowledge and discovery into real-world outputs. This is the process of innovation; turning research findings into new products, services and deliverables that address significant problems and result in vastly improved outcomes for the nation, and the rest of the world. Innovation relies on collaboration and engagement with the end-users of research, and is rarely achieved solely within an academic setting. Engaging with industry is key to ensuring that Australian ideas and discoveries return their full potential value to society. The productivity of Australia's biotechnology industry is internationally recognised and continued strategic policy support that incentivises and rewards collaboration with industry will ensure the future prosperity of our people, our industries and our nation.

Statement of Support

The BioMelbourne Network is strongly supportive of the need to incentivise behaviours that drive innovation in Australia, to capture the full value of the publically funded research in Australia and return social and economic value to the nation. We fully support the proposal that organisations undertaking publically funded research, including universities, medical research institutes and hospitals should be reviewed and rewarded on a diverse range of criteria that fully capture the impact of the research outputs produced. We maintain that research excellence and research quality continue to be critical to Australia's success and that additional measures are also required in the system to ensure that excellent research is able to return excellent outcomes and excellent impact for the nation.

Assessing engagement and impact should embrace a wide scope of criteria, beyond publication track record, journal impact factors and article citations and should include the quality of engagement and the quality of the interaction with industry partners.

The 2015 ATSE report "Research Engagement for Australia" made a strong case for how research engagement can be measured and outlined the rationale for improvements to the current ERA system that will provide a comprehensive metric that incorporates engagement with private and public sector partners.

The NISA consultation paper on Engagement and Impact Assessment provides an excellent review of the issues and challenges involved in measuring these parameters. We anticipate that the recommendations from this review will improve the culture, approaches and outcomes of academic engagement with industry, fostering a environment for greater collaboration, innovation and impact.

Specific Recommendation:

Implement quality measures that assess the impact and engagement of publically funded research through end-user surveys that target industry/sector partners.

We support the use of case studies to illustrate research engagement and impact, and acknowledge that there are difficulties in the ability to assess impact, as discussed in the paper. The most critical issues are that the timelines for realising the impact of research can be lengthy, attribution can be subjective particularly for multidisciplinary, multi-party collaborative research and that the final outcomes of assessment are very dependent on the assumptions made in the model. In all cases, we propose that the quality of industry engagement is a critical determinant of whether or not research will lead to long term impact and outcomes. We recommend that measures of the quality of industry engagement and impact research are assessed by introducing an "Industry Partner Satisfaction" survey of nominated case-studies that are presented by research organisations as part of research impact assessment.

An “Industry Partner Satisfaction Survey” could be conducted by a tender to a third party, to ensure independence and standardisation across research disciplines. In this way, the “industry partner” could be a private or public sector entity, arts or not-for-profit organisation as long as they have a significant collaborative relationship with a particular research organisation and are nominated as the “end-user” of the research for which assessment is being undertaken. The research organisations would provide the names and contacts of the direct contact with whom they engage with within the partner organisation, and a sub-set of these would be select at random for the survey. The survey questions would focus on issues around the ease of working with the research organisation, responsiveness, reliability, quality and value of the outcomes delivered to the industry partner.

A model for this process can be taken from the “Employer Satisfaction Survey” pilot undertaken by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, that sought to measure employer satisfaction with graduates’ generic skills, technical skills and work readiness.

A standardised survey would be robust, internationally recognised, comparable across disciplines, repeatable, time-bound, transparent and would reveal trends over time for each research organisation in a discipline specific manner. This will give a clear measure of whether or not intended policy objectives are being achieved. Importantly, this will then drive behavioral and cultural change within organisations that undertake publically funded research to increase the quality of interactions with industry partners, which will best position research for ongoing social and economic impact.

Additional comments:

1. We strongly support the idea that higher degree research students be included in the scope of the assessment. The recent ACOLA “Review of Australia’s Research Training System” makes a clear case in support of this proposal. Higher degree research (HDR) student are a major component of the research workforce within publically funded research organisations and the majority of students will end up working in non-academic sectors. Recommendation 5 from the ACOLA review states, “The Government should institute a longitudinal national data collection exercise to monitor course satisfaction, course completions and career outcomes for HDR training”. It is the HDR students that are being trained today who will need to drive and sustain the cultural change that is being sort as part of the NISA agenda. This data could be collected through the work of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) on Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), which may include HDR students.

2. It is recognised that there are significant differences in the quality and level of commercialisation of research undertaken within various research organisations in Australia. Whilst there are good international models for commercialisation that could be adopted, it is important to understand what works best within the Australian context. This is due to the different structure and funding models for academic research organisations in Australia and also the nature, size and scale of different Australian industry sectors. We suggest that benchmarking studies of approaches to commercialisation across Australian research organisations be undertaken to identify similarities to various international models and to identify and promote best practice in the Australia context.

3. A “business as usual” approach to assessing research impact is not in the national interest. We appreciate that there may be those who will argue strongly for a maintenance of the status quo on the basis of some of the challenges outlined in the consultation paper, namely that implementation of changes may be costly, could have a negative impact on research quality or may lead to a focus on short-term applied research goals. We recommend that an appropriate risk management framework be adopted that seeks to monitor the impact of any changes that are introduced and be agile enough to make corrections to the system where needed. The biggest risk would be to do nothing and to continue to widen the gaps that currently exist between Australia’s academic and industry sectors. There have been numerous reviews of Australia’s research sector over many decades, and it is clear that reform is needed. We support the case for the implementation of changes in the assessment of research impact that will foster a culture of collaboration and innovation in Australia.

This response was authored by Dr Krystal Evans with the support of the BioMelbourne Network Industry/Academia Working group, in consultation with the board and the members of the BioMelbourne Network. We would welcome an opportunity to further explore and discuss the industry-led recommendations outlined in this submission

With best regards,

Dr Krystal Evans
Chief Executive Officer
BioMelbourne Network

