SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE – INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISIONS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (2007 MEASURES NO 1) BILL 2007

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) group of Universities (comprised of Curtin University of Technology, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT University, the University of South Australia and the University of Technology, Sydney) are committed to forging partnerships with industry and government to deliver practical results which contribute to the nation's social and economic wealth.

Therefore, the ATN has been actively engaged in the national higher education sector debate regarding the development of the Federal Government's 'Research Quality Framework' (RQF) and has particularly advocated the importance of the model recognising and rewarding research which has 'impact' i.e. research which is beneficially applied to achieve social/cultural, economic and/or environmental outcomes.

In considering the above mentioned Bill, it is noted that a major criticism of the RQF is the perceived problems in measuring the impacts of research. The purpose of this paper is to provide the Senate Committee with the details of a major RQF Trial the ATN undertook together with Murdoch University, and outline our findings specifically in relation to assessing research impact.

BACKGROUND

The ATN and Murdoch University undertook a trial RQF exercise over 2005/6 that considered the quality and impact of research.

Over 650 researchers from across the six Universities participated in the trial. Institutionally-defined research groups, usually some 15 researchers, were the unit of assessment. Qualitative and quantitative data at both the individual researcher and aggregated research group level were collated and submitted for assessment. Discipline-based assessment panels, chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellors from the participating organisations, included academic peers and end-users. Subsequently a sub-set of the above research groups were sent to international reviewers for follow-up review.

Key objectives of the ATN RQF Trial were to:

- trial ways to engage our researchers to participate in quality assessment and in particular how they can best demonstrate their excellence;
- evaluate research quality across key research groups in participating universities;
- explore viable methods for assessment of research impact appropriate to the mission and objectives of the participating universities.

As a result of this extensive trial, the ATN has shown that research impact can be credibly defined, validated and assessed across many research fields. Our processes for evaluating impact should form an integral part of the RQF or any alternative national research assessment framework which will consider publicly-funded research.

While there are divergent views across the sector, the ATN believes the inclusion of research impact is essential to support the national innovation agenda. This agenda over recent decades has drawn university research towards greater co-operation with industry and the community. In Australia, the relatively small scale of industry research requires strong involvement by universities in fostering innovation.

The RQF must thus encourage diversity and reward impact-driven research. As a result of work such as the ATN trial, Australia is poised to lead the development of impact assessment internationally. Australian universities must continue to embrace and drive this development and ensure we remain the benchmark in this important space.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

The ATN trial collected more than 200 case studies of impact, each built around appropriate and verifiable evidence. Around 20% of our research group submissions were sent to a group of international end user and expert assessors to moderate our local assessments. This additional phase allowed us to benchmark our research impact (and quality) against a range of international standards. Each of the ATN research groups were assigned an impact rating (A-E)

This case study assessment process showed clearly that researchers were able to provide tangible examples of impact to enable a viable assessment by selected end users. Across the broad discipline mix, sound qualitative and quantitative evidence was readily available to support the case study submissions.

The ATN trial also demonstrated the differences between research outputs, research outcomes and research impact through the use of clear and relevant descriptors.

Subsequent to the trial, the ATN drew on the considerable literature relating to research adoption and knowledge transfer to develop the following model (Figure 1) to define the fundamental nature of research impact. Information gathered during the trial shows that impact can be understood in a sequence of stages having increasing benefit.

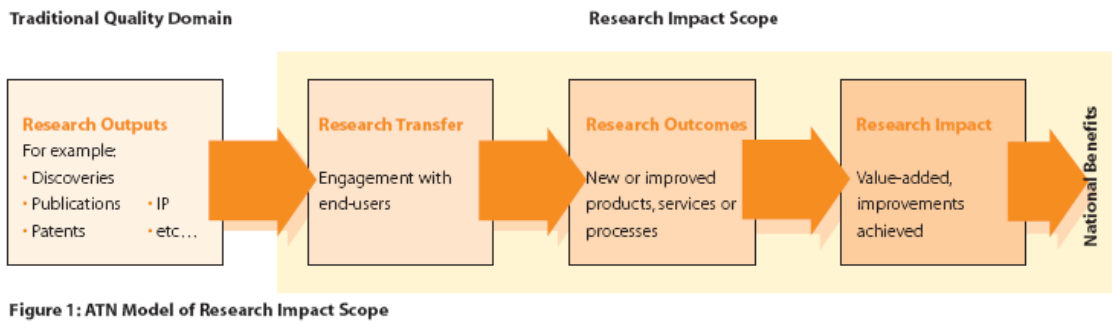

Figure 1: ATN Model of Research Impact Scope

[From Duryea, Hochman, Parfitt (2007) Measuring the impact of research, *Research Global*]

This impact assessment model employs a scale of end-user benefits against which research groups provide verifiable impact claims. As described above the methodology for measuring the scale involves the use of case studies, supported by qualitative or quantitative indicators that support the claims.

In summary, the ATN found that impact as defined above:

- is an important element in understanding the value of research;
- requires a clear definition relating to measurable benefits;
- can be described accurately through research group level case studies;
- can be reliably evaluated by an expert panel applying judgement to a combination of the qualitative and quantitative indicators on a scale ranked A-E.

CONCLUSION

The ATN strongly believes that an Australian research assessment model must evaluate and fund research excellence of quality and impact, wherever it occurs.

Based on our experience in the RQF trial, the ATN believes that a national research assessment model needs to recognise:

1. Impact beyond the scholarly community is critical to the national innovation agenda. As a result, every effort should be made to adequately define and assess it in order to secure effective research for Australia.

2. Impact needs to be clearly defined and relate to verifiable outcomes from research.

3. Impact can be credibly demonstrated in an evidence portfolio/impact statement. Such a statement can include quantitative and qualitative information. The use of an impact statement should be an integral part of any research assessment model.

4. Impact can be assessed by expert judgment supported by appropriate qualitative and quantitative indicators. With suitable guidelines for both submission and assessment, the extent of impact and the depth or intensity of the impact at any given point can be assessed and compared.