



Asian Studies
Association
of Australia

Direct Advice to the ARC on the
NISA Impact & Engagement Assessment Exercise

22 August 2016

The ASAA is grateful for the opportunity to provide direct advice to the ARC in relation to the NISA Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper.

As the peak body for Asian Studies in Australian universities, we have focused our comments on issues that are of specific relevance to researchers in this field. On those matters on which we have not made specific comment, we are broadly in agreement with submissions provided to the ARC by the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) and the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH). We have therefore not addressed every question set out in the call for submissions template in the NISA consultation paper, and at times we have addressed more than one question with the points set out below.

1. What definition of ‘engagement’ should be used for the purpose of assessment?

On this question, the ARC should take a broad view of Australia’s national interests.

Specifically, Australian engagement with Asian societies, cultures and economies is critically important to developing the Australian economy in the coming decades, and in Australia’s capacity to work effectively with Asian partners across a broad range of economic, social and political issues. The recent report by the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA), [Smart Engagement with Asia](#), highlights the scale of Australia’s enmeshment with Asian societies. Australia is an important partner with its Asian neighbours, and Australian academics play significant roles in guiding discussion on--and indeed resolving--offshore issues with direct relevance to Australian national interests.

Many of these issues, including some which cause continuing domestic and international tensions in Asian societies, concern the Humanities and Social Sciences, and Asian Studies academics engage Australian, Asian and broader international publics in relation to them. For example, after Timor Leste voted for independence from Indonesia in 1999, several

Asian Studies researchers played critical roles in Dili and other Timorese sites, helping establish and run new national institutions. Australian Asia specialists actively explain Asian politics and its compulsions to Australian audiences, directly affecting and influencing their understandings of Asia, for example through the ASAA's own online bulletin, Asian Currents. It is therefore essential that any exercise in impact and engagement assessment acknowledges the critical importance of external engagement to Australia's security and prosperity. In addition, significant sections of Australian society are now Asian in ethnic and cultural origin, and their economic, social and cultural interests are bound up with developments in Asia. This means that measures of engagement need to reach beyond Australia's borders, and also need to be sensitive to Australia's own increasing diversity.

For this reason we point out that the consultation paper omits the idea of community engagement, overlooking the fact that Asian Studies researchers are adept at engaging Asian communities both inside and outside Australia. For example, the courses our members teach that derive from their research, and the students they supervise within the research programs they run, should be seen as excellent opportunities for Australian Track 2 diplomacy. Our members are in frequent contact with present and future Asian leaders, and play a key role in fostering outward-looking, cosmopolitan and collaborative attitudes that underpin cooperation between Australia and Asia. While we acknowledge the difficulty of assessing engagement or impact on the basis of graduate destinations, we note that the presence of Australian research-trained alumni in Asian governments is a crucial aspect of Australia's capacity to shape decision-making in the region. In addition, our members' outreach presentations, conferences, workshops, all of which draw from research that engages with Asia, also engage and attract members of Asian diasporic communities settled temporarily or permanently in Australia.

The ASAA also points out that the structure of research work can itself constitute an important form of engagement. Asian Studies experts are often part of multidisciplinary teams solving complex and sticky social problems. These teams are themselves often transnational, and such collaborative research can produce important and long-lasting partnerships. For more elaboration of this point, the ASAA refers the ARC to chapters by Jayasuriya and Chua in *The Social Sciences in the Asian Century* (2015), edited by Carol Johnson, Vera Mackie and Tessa Morris-Suzuki.

2. What definition of 'impact' should be used for the purpose of assessment?

The distinction between 'impact' and 'engagement' is important, yet the more diffuse nature of the concept of engagement should not become an excuse for a narrow definition of impact. Specifically, the ARC should not confine itself to using income as a proxy for impact.

One disadvantage of relying on income alone lies in the fact that ideas in the Humanities and Social Sciences usually cannot be patented, and are therefore weakly protected by intellectual property law. Further, even profound impacts on social understanding are unlikely to be converted into real dollars. Important aspects of this disadvantage include:

- a) A widespread public perception, including across private industry, that much social science and humanistic knowledge (i.e. research outputs) consists of public goods, funded by public investment, and developed by academics for broad social and civic benefit. For this reason, many private entities tend to see such goods as 'already paid for', and in declining to pay for them 'a second time', they can be unwilling to contribute to a formal income stream for these activities.

- b) This unwillingness does not mean that such knowledge is not valued, or is not capable of being valued, albeit not always in financial terms. As public goods, for example, they can create strong impacts in the form of population-wide skills, norms, attitudes and understandings. These impacts can underpin the capacity of any given industry, workforce or community to create important, useful, and profitable, outcomes. Such outcomes might be taken for granted, and potentially lost, if research impact assessment is entirely financialised.
- c) Some important Asian Studies research generates analyses of Asian developments that may run contrary to the views of Asian governments, yet is essential in shaping Australian responses to these developments. This form of contestation can restrict researchers' access to international income streams, potentially distorting assessments of impact that rely solely on income.

Take, for example, very real advances in intercultural understanding between Australians and our neighbours first fostered in Australia by Asian Studies, and since diffused more broadly across the graduate population through Asian 'sampler' programs like the New Colombo Plan. Such advances underpin Australians' capacity to work and innovate together regardless of their diverse origins, without being thrown off course by discomfort with cultural and political difference. Attitudinally, such advances may or may not be associated with a financial return to the nation, albeit not because they are not valued in other, non-financial terms, or because they cannot be valued in financial terms. Either way, research that underpins important 'soft' skills should not be driven out of our institutions by perverse incentives, as results will include economic costs to the nation, whether or not anyone has sought to quantify those costs.

Further, the ASAA perceives that relying on impact alone might also generate risks including:

- a) Many smaller institutions in the Australian research environment are poorly capitalised. Lack of capital brings the risk that such institutions might gear themselves internally towards short-term bets on income streams that may not yield strong returns.
- b) Not all institutions offer comprehensive research (or teaching) opportunities, and especially in smaller institutions with weaker economies of scale, entire research centres, institutes and divisions are made and unmade in line with short-term, reward-chasing tactics. This can result in scarce resources being wasted.
- c) Such tactics can also marketise research priorities in a manner that can create constant churn through institutions and their workforces, with potentially profound impacts on institutional memory, capacity and governance.

In other words, a narrow, income-based definition of impact can create perverse and destructive incentives in the sector. Income measurement may be one useful component of a metrics developed for measuring impact, but this component cannot be permitted to become the sole driver of institutional behaviour.

One additional problem that can result from using income as a proxy for impact is that the importance of in-kind support, and the creation of shared value, can be obscured. Some forms of research impact are better assessed in terms of the multiple forms of value generated, including in partnerships with researchers motivated to find solutions for sticky social problems. Many such problems arise in areas from which governments might be withdrawing, including in terms of funding and/or service provision, while the burgeoning and

increasingly transnational community sector might be taking over. Especially in fields of research in which potential industry partners are themselves poorly-capitalised, and/or new social ventures emerging in areas overlooked by government and established industries, shared value can only be created within partnerships enabled by in-kind support. In addition, even within established industries, and especially in the new economy, there is an emerging movement aimed at creating shared value. Asian Studies researchers who strive for innovation in associated fields should not be hampered by measures that might blind institutions to the multiple forms of value they create, including at times with industry partners that might themselves operate on shoestring budgets.

To conclude our comments in this section, we note that Asian Studies scholars already engage strongly with research end-users and beneficiaries in Australia and Asia, and produce real and significant forms of research impact that are both financial and non-financial. ASAA members have been consistent and committed in their provision of policy advice to governments and industry, for example, including in fields associated with social justice, social cohesion and reconciliation, in which impact produced has greatly exceeded income. Our members have advised truth and reconciliation commissions, feuding political parties inflaming racial and religious tensions, governments negotiating with violent separatists, campaigns led by victims of historical injustice, and Australian governments formulating policies for Asian engagement. In addition, our members perform important work in the area of cultural exchange, including via periods of fieldwork, arts residencies and other forms of in-country research. We also frequently translate and explain ideas and concepts that might be critically important in shaping public attitudes in Asia; yet are inaccessible to an Australian public that is largely monolingual. These forms of impact create important 'soft' economic and security benefits for Australia, yet they resist effective financialisation.

Finally, engagement efforts made by institutions working in the Humanities and Social Sciences usually follow a standard 'freemium' digital business model, whereby knowledge services are provided free of charge, to generate income by offering additional, paid, services. Typically, engaged Asian Studies researchers establish their reputations via free-to-user publications in the form of reports, blogs and opinion pieces and specialised presentations, in addition to their academic publications. Only later is there any real potential for these researchers to attract income, for example via contract research, funding in Categories 2-4, and consultancies. This business model produces a significant disparity in the potential for income generation between fundamental and applied research. Yet failing to recognise the investment value of free-to-user knowledge services is likely to introduce perverse incentives which will undermine Humanities and Social Science business models, including in Asian Studies, thereby reducing researchers' capacity to create genuine impact over time. We expect this impact to be particularly profound in poorly-capitalised environments, and note that the freemium engagement model is especially useful in such environments.

4. Would a selective approach using case studies or exemplars to assess impact provide benefits and incentives to universities?

There are costs and benefits to this approach.

On the one hand, case studies allow for a snapshot of research that may otherwise be difficult to assess. The benefit to institutions is that this may produce a more rounded view of the research they conduct, by recognising work that might not generate much income, but might nevertheless create important forms of impact. These other forms of impact are sometimes already poorly recognised by institutions.

On the other hand, there are some potentially negative consequences of a narrow focus on case studies or exemplars. In particular, researchers may be rightly concerned if their work is not included as a case study by their institution, particularly in cases where the institution might take a narrow interpretation of predicted assessment parameters likely to be set by the ARC. Negative consequences can result, such as those that can follow REF assessments in the United Kingdom, in which some researchers working in areas not valued by their institutions reported being sidelined within departments. Others have reported noticeably corrosive effects on job security, particularly for those whose research was not selected for inclusion in portfolios of case studies presented by institutions. For more details, we refer the ARC to the Times Higher Education University Workplace Survey, 2014.

We also draw attention to the sometimes destructive effect on collegiality of the use of case studies. The ASAA has picked up an amount of anecdotal evidence reporting serious internal politicisation in the selection of case studies, and the appropriation of strong potential case studies by local power-holders. Without careful management, the use of case studies has the potential for long-standing negative effects, including those already being generated by some institutions now working to position themselves for the pilot assessment in 2017. ECRs, in particular, can find themselves in vulnerable positions, particularly as they are more likely to hold contract positions at Levels B and C. ECRs might find their affinity with notions of engagement exceeds that of older, more senior power-holders, and their success can increase, rather than decrease, their exposure to such negative repercussions. There could also be gendered disparities, given a known concentration of women researchers at these levels.

On balance, case studies are, in many ways, a more efficient and less work-intensive way to track the different types of impact generated by research conducted in our institutions. They can never, however, be used to capture the many individual pathways to impact, and the REF exercise in the UK showed that case studies can also be self-defeating. This is especially likely in scenarios in which there are as many pathways to impact as there are case studies submitted for consideration. We note that in Australia, in previous exercises aimed at measuring research outcomes, the ARC's preferred approach has been to include all research for all institutions (for example, in the ERA). This approach, though more work-intensive, is fairer and eliminates some of the potential negative consequences of a selective case study approach.

In addition, we note that any proposed case study approach should be able to account for cross-institutional work, and manage the risk that institutions might seek to avoid or wholly appropriate work performed across institutional boundaries. We also note that expanding the definition of 'impact' beyond using income as a proxy will require more complex, and qualitative as well as quantitative, accounts of how impact is created by research. For example, case studies might need to include statements from end-users, beneficiaries and stakeholders regarding the impact of Asian Studies research in their communities, both inside and outside Australia.

6. What data is available to universities that could contribute to the engagement and impact assessment?

i. Should the destination of Higher Degree Research students be included in the scope of the assessment?

No. The contraction of the research sector has resulted in fewer students pursuing higher degrees by research, as they perceive that career opportunities within the sector, and, potentially outside the sector, are limited for graduates with research degrees.

ii. **Should other types of students be included or excluded from the scope of assessment (e.g. professional Masters level programmes, undergraduate students)?**

No. Masters enrolments are also contracting. Undergraduate students' destinations arguably point to a clearer path in terms of impact, but not engagement.

Nevertheless, our observations of the career trajectories of Asian Studies graduates from Australian institutions, in Australia and Asia, stand. Our graduates make a strong impact in leadership positions around the region and the world.

7. What are the key challenges for assessing engagement and impact and how can these be addressed?

Differences in disciplinary practices, standards and ideas of prestige are a considerable impediment to creating a one-size-fits-all metric for assessing impact and engagement. The time lag often involved in creating impact is another challenge, and is particularly significant for Asian Studies researchers who largely work in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Many of us also frequently work and publish in the languages of the region, not only in English. These languages are not easily picked up in metrics-based systems of counting output and impact.

In addition, any single metrics framework will very quickly be gamed by those who are invested in the process, including through some of the uncollegial behaviours we have described above. Assessment strategies invariably produce perverse incentives for institutions, managers and researchers to project the best-looking outcomes. This can lead to the proliferation of academic 'white noise', in which incremental advances in research are exaggerated, while bold and assertive work can be categorised as likely to take too long to produce case studies within pre-set time frames.

In relation to developing metrics frameworks, we refer the ARC to the [Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics](#), consisting of best practice guidelines developed in 2015, which aim to combine both accurate recording of research data with expert judgment of that data. All metrics developed and used to assess research engagement and/or impact need qualitative contextualisation.

8. Is it worthwhile to seek to attribute specific impacts to specific research and, if so, how should impact be attributed (especially in regard to a possible methodology that uses case studies or exemplars)?

Arguably, this approach only makes sense in limited cases: typically in the Humanities and Social Sciences, it is difficult to draw a direct line of correlation between a research project and a particular outcome. This difficulty is compounded by the widespread view, elaborated above, that humanistic and social science knowledge is a public good. Further, even in the Sciences, there are cases where a single outcome is the confluent result of multiple projects. Alternatively, the inverse might be true: multiple outcomes might result from a single project.

9. To what level of granularity and classification (e.g. ANZSRC Fields of Research) should measures be aggregated?

Fine granularity is required to capture the full measure of research impact in Asian Studies. At a minimum, the 4-digit Field of Research codes could capture more discipline-specific forms of engagement and impact. For many researchers in Asian Studies, however, and

indeed for a growing number of researchers in other Humanities and Social Science fields, 4-digit FOR codes are insufficient to account for the many pathways to impact that interdisciplinary researchers might take. Asian Studies researchers quite commonly ascribe xxxx99 FOR categories to their research, because the aim of interdisciplinary work is to transcend traditional academic boundaries.

Such work is a necessary and critical endeavour for researchers in all fields when attempting to create positive social impact. Interdisciplinary work takes time to produce impact (see, for example, the special issue of *Nature*, vol. 525/7569), and we cannot solve highly complex problems without it. Without a full accounting for the nature of our research, therefore, there is no way to measure the extent and impact of interdisciplinary research.

We therefore recommend fine granularity in measures adopted to measure and assess research impact and engagement. We hope it will be possible to develop forms of assessment which explicitly recognise and reward interdisciplinarity.

10. What timeframes should be considered for the engagement activities under assessment?

Assessing engagement activities over the previous five years would give a fair measure of how much effort has been devoted to such activities, thus providing some insight into how committed to engagement that institution has been. Five years should also allow sufficient time for engagement networks to develop and mature.

11. What timeframes should be considered for the impact activities under assessment?

A longer time frame should be considered in this case, given that this exercise should aim to assess the impact of all research activities undertaken within Australian institutions, and acknowledging that interdisciplinary research in particular takes time to demonstrate impact. We consider that ten to fifteen years would be reasonable.

12. How can the assessment balance the need to minimise reporting burden with robust requirements for data collection and verification?

The ARC should be sensitive to the reporting burdens placed on researchers, who must both produce innovative research and manage increasingly onerous reporting demands. For every administrator appointed to oversee reporting, vital funding is redirected from institutions' core business of teaching, learning and conducting research. This is particularly corrosive to research capacity in poorly-capitalised institutions, as described above. Institutions are already required to comply with extensive reporting requirements related to research output and quality, and individual researchers already report their research through various university- and sector-level mechanisms. Should this exercise to measure impact and engagement substantially increase the reporting burden placed on individual researchers and/or their institutions, then it is incumbent on the Australian Government to provide institutional support for it. If this proposed assessment task becomes an ongoing requirement of government, then it must allocate new funds towards its completion.

13. What approaches or measures can be used to manage the disciplinary differences in research engagement and impact? and

14. What measures or approaches to evaluation used for the assessment can appropriately account for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement and impacts?

In reality, there may be no way to create a single approach or set of measures that has both the flexibility and the integrity to assess research engagement and impact across all disciplines, particularly one of special national importance like Asian Studies. The REF exercise in the UK appears to have failed in this regard, and one of its key findings has been that it was futile to have tried. It is the view of the ASAA that the present exercise under NISA should avoid the mistakes of the REF, and is itself unlikely to develop a single approach that is suitable for all fields.

We therefore urge the ARC to consider the expediency, not to mention the professional value and integrity, of allowing the ASAA, as the peak professional body in Asian Studies, to develop our own measures for impact and engagement assessment in Asian Studies. We have convened a working group precisely for this purpose, and commit it to extensive engagement with our membership, which brings together Asian Studies researchers from a range of disciplinary and institutional backgrounds. We also represent researchers at every career stage, ranging from postgraduate students to senior university administrators. Our working group is broadly representative of our membership, and consists of:

- Prof. Robert Cribb, ANU
- Dr Amrita Malhi, Adelaide
- Prof. Vera Mackie, Wollongong
- Dr Annie Pohlman, UQ
- A/Prof. Kama Maclean, UNSW
- Dr Laura Dales, UWA

Further, we advocate this approach in general across the NISA exercise, as disciplinary peak bodies are best-positioned to develop measures that are relevant to their fields. We also recommend that individual researchers should be able to draw on the measures developed by their respective peak bodies to demonstrate engagement and impact.

15. What types of engagement indicators should be used?

Asian Studies researchers are involved in a wide variety of forms of engagement. The following indicators, therefore, will need to be recognised, among others that the ASAA working group would develop:

- Library holdings
- Media reporting and invitations to comment in the media
- Parliamentary submissions
- Specialist research reports (e.g. to the United Nations, corporates and industry partners, World Health Organisation, governments at all levels)
- Audience and attendance figures for creative works, outreach seminars, policy development workshops, and similar staged events
- Translation work for the international dissemination of ideas
- Work translated into other languages and into English (e.g. for education and policy purposes)
- Collaborations across institutions and with other organisations

Such measures are particularly useful in demonstrating the wide reach of Asian Studies research, in ways that are not always understood by institutions themselves.

16. What types of impact indicators should be used?

Asian Studies researchers create a wide variety of forms of impact. The following indicators, therefore, will need to be recognised, among others that the ASAA working group would develop:

- Changes or developments in government policy
- An increased facility with, Asian societies, politics, cultures and histories among the Asian Studies graduate cohort
- New public debates around ideas generated by researchers, including by other researchers, governments, community groups, the media, and other thought leaders
- Invitations to further disseminate or popularise ideas developed from research
- Research-based curriculum developments in other universities, training institutes and schools

Such measures are particularly useful in demonstrating the profound, often non-financial, impact of Asian Studies research, in ways that are not always understood by institutions themselves.

17. Are there any additional comments you wish to make?

The nature of Asian Studies and other forms of interdisciplinary research is rendering some of the 'traditional' outlets for academic research rather old-fashioned in their approach. We expect that this engagement and impact assessment exercise will drive greater differentiation in the practices adopted by particular fields of research. It is our hope that it will also generate more serious efforts by such fields to reach out to others to establish collaborations.