

Statement on ‘Research Assessment in Australia: Evidence for Modernisation’ – Dr Mari Kondo

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I would like to commend ACOLA and the Expert Working Group members on an excellent report on the current state of research assessment in Australia.

From an early- and mid-career researcher (EMCR) perspective, it is nice to finally feel heard. Many EMCR concerns that had previously been largely anecdotal have been documented in this report. I think this gives us an important foundation to move forward.

My question as an EMCR is ‘What now? How will Australia implement fair, effective, accurate and useful research assessments?’.

There is a need for a wholistic and long-term view of the purpose of research. A focus on non-publication-based metrics is progress but care is needed to not de-value knowledge generation. The trend in recent years has been to support applied research over fundamental research. Discovery research without immediate translatability has struggled to be seen as valuable by policy makers and research funders. New ideas are the starting point of future new technology or applications. Turn the tap off and eventually the water stops flowing. So, it is important to not be short-sighted with metrics and to make sure there aren’t unintended consequences from new metrics.

In academia we often refer to the leaky pipeline that disproportionately impacts women and researchers from diversity backgrounds. Having a pipeline that leaks specific types of people more than others is an equity issue that is deeply tied up with how research is assessed and how researchers are valued. But researchers leaving academia is not a problem per se as long as their skills are properly recognised and put to use in other sectors. This is why having metrics that facilitate the sector mobility of researchers is vital. We also need a system that better prepares researchers through training in a range of transferable skills.

The impact of research assessment on workplace culture has been highlighted in the report. Diversity and inclusion must be prioritised so that we can change the system from one that keeps rewarding those who are best resourced, to a system that values the diversity of researchers as a source of research and intellectual creativity. Without bold changes we will continue to lose EMCRs, especially researchers from under-represented groups who face disproportionate hurdles to stay in research.

I am keen to see what comes next and for diverse groups like the EMCR Forum and others that represent intersectional communities of researchers to be an active part of building a better system of research assessment, hence research, in Australia.

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