Audit of research volume on the cards

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FUTURE rounds of the Excellence in Research for Australia audit may reveal the volume, not just the quality, of research in universities.

The pros and cons of volume indicators will be canvassed in a consultation paper “in the coming months,” the Australian Research Council says.

In a recent analysis of the 2012 ERA results, former Melbourne University research chief Frank Larkins used a university’s number of ratings at or above world standard as one measure of research quantity.

“The quantity of research output as well as the quality of that performance is important in determining the contribution that a university makes to the national research effort,” Professor Larkins says in his L H Martin Institute paper.

Sydney University did best on this measure, with 99 four digit research fields rated at or above world standard.

Sydney was closely followed by Melbourne (97) and Queensland (96) but further behind were the Australian National University (62), the University of Western Australia (62) and Adelaide (60).

“Five universities had between 40 and 50 excellent (units of evaluation) and another 10 universities had between 30 and 40 excellent submissions,” Professor Larkins said.

“The findings highlight the fact that there is a significant gap in the breadth of quality discipline coverage between the top five universities and the remainder.”

But Professor Larkins said outsiders could not know the true volume of research that lay behind a top rating in the ERA.

In a given four digit field, it was possible for a lone researcher at one university to be responsible for the minimum 50 outputs attracting a rating of four or five.
Another university with the same rating in the same field might be drawing on outputs from a group of researchers with many more than 50 papers in toto.

A spokesperson for the ARC said: “ERA makes no judgments about the relationship between volume and quality.

“IT is perfectly possible for a very small or very large unit of evaluation to receive the same rating, and there are examples of small and large units at all points of the ERA rating scale.”

After the first ERA round in 2010, there was “very limited support” for volume indicators.

However, since the 2012 ERA, “there has been some feedback from the university sector that knowing the volume of each unit of evaluation would assist universities and other stakeholders to better understand the results,” the ARC spokesperson said.

The University of Western Sydney’s interim deputy vice-chancellor for research Andrew Cheetham said a volume indicator “could be useful”.

He said the departure or retirement of a few researchers could eliminate some universities from ERA assessment in a given four digit field.

UWS was singled out in the Lankins paper for having increased the number of four digit fields in which it was assessed in 2012 while at the same time lifting overall performance.

Most universities ended up with fewer assessments at the four digit level than in 2010. Universities used new flexibility in the coding of research to give full weight to first class outputs. However, it is believed that same flexibility also was used in some cases to “hide” weak research.

“The ARC is on the look out for that. Many universities got ‘please explain’ letters,” Professor Cheetham said.

He said the 2012 ERA could indeed show real improvements in research if a university, such as UWS, was growing rapidly.

For such an institution, the audit period for the latest ERA covered two recent and significantly more productive years, while two older, less productive years fell out. For the 2015 ERA, there would be a three year difference at each end.

“My prediction is that UWS will do even better (in 2015),” Professor Cheetham said.

In ERA 2012, UWS lifted its number of four digit level assessments by nine to 53, at the same time increasing its overall excellence rating from 41 per cent in 2010 to 68 per cent in 2012.

“So, there’s a university clearly on the up,” Professor Lankins said.

Professor Cheetham said UWS had been growing fast by hiring good performers, building up research institutes and doing simple things, such as insisting that academics develop conference papers into solid journal articles.

“This has been a strategy directed at increasing the quality and quantity of research here,” Professor Cheetham said.

UWS also had used the more flexible rules of 2012 to better reflect its research strengths, he said.