

University Accord Interim Report - COKI response

The Curtin Open Knowledge Initiative (COKI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Accord Interim report. The report is a positive step towards addressing the significant structural issues facing the Australian Higher Education sector and we are broadly supportive of its recommendations.

The focus on inclusion within the opportunities that Higher Education Institutions create for all is to be welcomed. The Report's focus aligns with our own work seeking to identify how universities can be configured to support a wide range of roles and purposes for and with society as a whole. We also welcome the immediate recommendations and the issues identified for further consideration, agreeing with many of the issues highlighted and their prioritisation.

In this response we focus our attention on two areas:

1. Those where a more integrated and holistic framing of the purpose and roles of the sector could strengthen the overarching narrative and enhance the implementation and impact of your work; and
2. Technical capacities and possibilities that can address the immediate need for less burdensome and more informative research evaluation, while also helping to integrate the evaluation of knowledge work, engagement, inclusion and impact more fully.

An Overarching Framework to link the report's themes

In an initial [submission to the Review Panel](#)¹ we noted the value of adopting an overarching framework as a means of working towards a coherent sector wide narrative of role and purpose. We offered our work on [Open Knowledge Institutions](#)² as one example of such a framework. In our view, stronger links between themes would be supported by reference to an overarching sense of purpose. Some brief examples are given below.

Translation, commercialisation, inclusion and engagement

The Interim Report discusses questions of commercialisation and translation separately to those of community engagement and support and inclusion. We would argue that the capacity for commercial and industrial collaboration requires similar skills, platforms and support frameworks to those required for collaboration with communities, civil society, government and indigenous groups.

Commercialisation is often framed as translation *from* the lab to the market (i.e. outwards), while community engagement is often framed as *listening to* the needs of stakeholders (i.e. inwards). Policy work is frequently focused on understanding the needs of policy makers so as to translate academic work to their context. In our own work, we note that all of these processes require similar capacities. We have found that framing these activities as *translation* is useful: emphasising two-way processes of communication between different knowledge communities and domains and the skills and capacities needed to enable that communication.

At Curtin we have a Commercialisation Office and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies. In many ways they are very different. However, providing the frameworks and systems that enable productive and generative interaction between different groups with different needs, languages and power relationships, is core to the work of both. Both of these groups seek to create a trusted space for productive and *bidirectional* communication, and in so doing to facilitating the trust that enables productive knowledge work with impact.

Chapter 2.6 frames civic and community engagement largely in a way that presumes that it is resourced externally, rather than taking the opportunity to place it in the same frame as industrial collaborations. It also focuses on regional universities and issues, which are very important. However, this section is notable in its limited discussion of engaged and community led work involving city and Group of Eight institutions. This absence positions civic and community engaged work as “different” and implies that it is something that happens at institutions that are not top performers in terms of traditional bibliometric measures. In doing so it misses an important opportunity to position engagement as a driver of excellent research with high impact and creates a false dichotomy between “applied” or “engaged” research on one hand and “blue skies” and “excellent” research on the other. There is an opportunity to reframe this false dichotomy by identifying the opportunities for *all* researchers to amplify the short, medium and long term impact of their work by engaging with the challenges experienced by industries, communities, civil society and government. All of our work is enhanced by a deeper understanding of its context.

¹ Elli et al (2023). [Submission to the consultation on the Accord Discussion Paper](#)

² Montgomery et al. (2021). [Open Knowledge Institutions: Reinventing Universities](#). MIT Press, Cambridge.

Knowledge Diplomacy, International Students and Research

In Chapter 2.5 international students are framed mainly as an input with potential barriers to uptake (eg Considerations for Change a-f) and the role of research as one focused on innovation and commercialisation (eg Considerations for Change g). The framing is largely one of Soft Power with the goal of achieving influence and serving Australia's foreign policy goals.

We would argue for approaching this from the perspective of Knowledge Diplomacy³ which offers a more generative, equal and participatory framework. This would both help to link the teaching and research elements more deeply as well as pointing to respectful knowledge partnerships. This approach will help to position Australia as a trusted knowledge partner, not merely another extractive centre of power. From a foreign policy perspective this differentiates us from geopolitical competitors and aligns with current diplomatic goals and positioning in the Indo-Pacific over the medium to long term.

These two areas are examples. The interim report does a good job describing the challenges, issues and opportunities for engaged research and teaching and the role that HEIs do and could play. We would argue only that the report could be enhanced by more explicitly identifying the interconnections between the underlying cultural and structural issues. A broader critical framework will help to identify and address these.

In concrete terms this means looking at arguments, examples, and case studies that frame flows in one direction (students as inputs, rural universities as funded charitable institutions that provide support to their communities, international research collaborations as a revenue opportunity). We suggest emphasising more how these might be bidirectional. Focusing on how HEIs can become platforms for these kinds of knowledge making interactions across research-led-teaching, participatory learning, community engagement and research application, has the potential to build a powerful shared narrative for progressive change. There is an opportunity to explicitly identify capacities, changes and support that support deep underlying change that will drive wider impacts across the remit of the report.

Evaluation and Tracking Change - an Integrative Approach

As an initiative focused on the transformative potential of high quality information for structural change we welcome the recommendation to consider “deploying advances in data science to develop a ‘light touch’ automated metrics-based research quality assessment system” as well as “developing metrics to understand industry/university and government/university research collaboration and translation”.

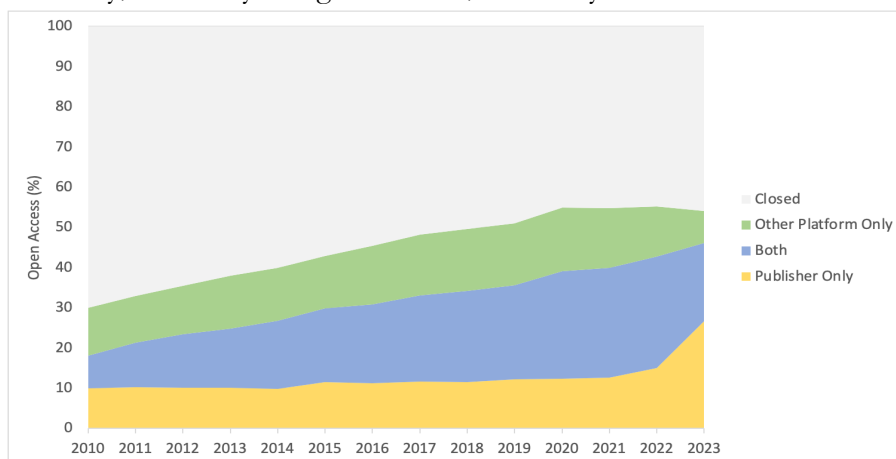


Figure 1. Open Access levels for Australian outputs, 2010-2023. Levels of open access provided via publisher websites has risen substantially in 2022-3 in response to publishing agreements. However, overall levels of open access have stagnated at 2020 levels due to a drop in access provided by other platforms. This may be due to the focus on publisher agreements leading to a lack of resourcing and support for other routes to open access.

We would point to the technical capacities to provide high level information on research performance,

collaborations, as well as incorporating data on inclusion, both in our work and in others. These capacities are not simply a like-for-like replacement of traditional evaluation but offer radically new possibilities.

To give just one example, we have recently expanded on our work modelling the benchmarks that were planned for the ERA23 exercise to use a journal based subject assignment to model university performance across the 2020 ANZUS Fields of Research (FoRs, excepting the new Indigenous FoRs). We were able to implement a system for modelling and tracking university performance with no information from the institutions themselves. The modelling would of course be improved by institutional input, particularly the contextual knowledge that would provide gold-standard output-level FoR assignments. Nonetheless we were able to develop a useful and flexible model of how university performance within a 2023 ERA exercise would have looked.

³ See for example Knight (2018). Knowledge Diplomacy: A discussion paper.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220623025529/www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/kno.pdf>

But we are also able to do many things that were impossible within the old, manual, framework. We are able to update the model on demand with streaming data. This provides opportunities not simply for retrospective analysis, but also to consider the real-time effects of interventions. As an example we are currently tracking the effect of interventions in the publishing system through publisher agreements negotiated by Council of Australian University Librarians on open access levels in close to real time. Unfortunately we are not seeing a significant increase in overall levels of access to Australian outputs in 2022-23. The data suggests that a focus on publisher-mediated open access has led to a lack of attention on populating repositories as a means of access, raising questions about whether this significant investment is delivering an optimal outcome.

In addition to traditional indicators of research excellence we can also track aspects of engagement such as co-authorship with industry, international collaborations, diversity of citations and others. There is potential to track student engagement in publications as a proxy of research-led teaching as well as workforce parameters such as evidence of career paths through the presence and absence of specific authors in the publishing system.

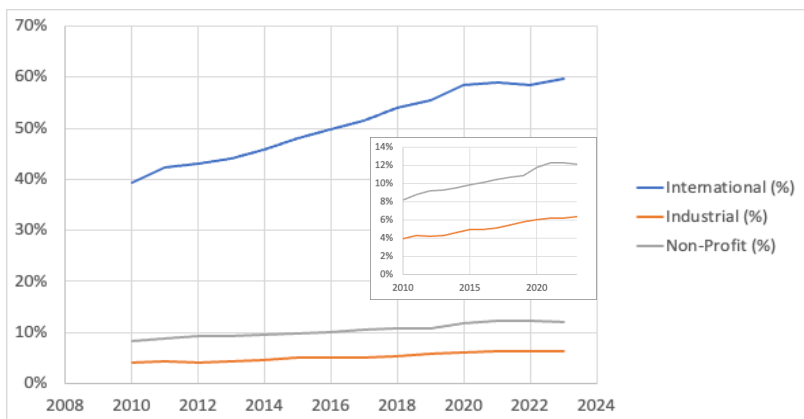


Figure 2. Collaboration as a proportion of total Australian outputs. Proportion of outputs (all organisations) that have at least one international collaboration, are collaborations between an institution with the type “Education” in the Research Organisation Registry and with type “Nonprofit”, and between organisations with the type “Education” and “Company”. Collaborations show a rise from 2010 to 2022 with evidence of stalled increases 2020-2023, which may be linked to the pandemic.

The interim report identifies an opportunity for government to act as an exemplar research user. This would provide an opportunity to build and improve on systems for tracking the use of research into legislation, policy and implementation. Initiatives such as the Analysis and Policy Observatory (APO) have created infrastructures that could be leveraged to track the usage and application of research at scale. However, Australian research communication and evaluation infrastructures, including our own at COKI, are currently resource limited and fragile: existing on ‘soft money’. We therefore welcome the emphasis on the need for serious consideration of infrastructures to support research, evaluation, and impact. We believe that “meta-infrastructures” capable of supporting Australia’s capacity to access the forms of monitoring needed to support a national research agenda and priorities should be included in this consideration.

There is a substantial opportunity to link these capacities more explicitly to tracking progress on the engagement and inclusion goals flagged in the interim report. To truly realise the opportunity will require a coordinated effort across the sector to fully surface the process of research and scholarship, including communication beyond traditional publications. We have previously worked with creative practice researchers within Curtin to identify ways in which their activities and outputs could be more effectively surfaced and their impacts monitored⁴. A coordinated approach across the sector could build a world-leading platform for driving progress on inclusive and engaged scholarship - while connecting this explicitly to research excellence.

The resourcing required to support such a capacity would be substantially less than the costs associated with traditional research evaluation practices that do not engage with recent developments in data science and open bibliometric data. An Australian sovereign capacity for knowledge information on the research sector that integrates and combines aspects of traditional research and teaching evaluation with a strategic investment in the capacity to evidence engagement and wider impacts has enormous potential. The Australian Centre for Evaluation⁵ provides an example of a fully resourced commitment by the government to building a stronger evidence base for policy implementation.

A sector-wide collaborative and coinvestment with government could build an exceptional and world-leading capacity, linking the goals of the Accord Review with culture and institutional change. It could also form the basis for a program of dissemination and interaction, driving further the goals for engagement, translation and impact that the Interim Report Identifies.

⁴ Quigley et al. (2022). [Creative Practice Research Outputs: Opportunities for Curtin University](#) (Version 1). Zenodo.; Quigley (2022). [Increasing the visibility of creative practice research outputs: Presentation at Creative Imaginations](#). Zenodo.

⁵ Boggards (2023) [Australian Centre for Evaluation: A quick guide](#). Australian Parliamentary Library,