ERA and the performance regime in Australian Higher Education

A review of the policy context

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UQ Social Policy Unit
Research Paper No. 6

May 2013
Social Policy Unit

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2. To develop the social policy discipline and its visibility at UQ and in Australia;
3. To develop partnerships with external bodies to promote public debate and advocacy on key contemporary social policy issues.


Biographies

Alison Gable is a research fellow with the School of Social Work and Human Services at The University of Queensland. An early career researcher, Dr Gable’s interests have focused on the research of complex phenomenon, professionalism, interdisciplinarity and education.
ERA and the performance regime in Australian higher education: 
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Abstract

The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative is an evaluation framework directed at improving the international standing of Australian research. It is a particular variant of a performance based research funding system conceptualised and implemented under recent higher education reforms of the Australian Labor Government. The expectation of the Rudd/Gillard Labor governments has been that ERA will have a transformational impact on universities via its focus on comparative, international indicators of quality research. This summary positions ERA within a complex web of policy trends and initiatives that have dominated Australian higher education over several decades. It considers the policy history of government-institutional relations and the emergence of the enterprise university as the context for increased accountability. It then provides some insight into the rationale behind more recent reforms through an examination of the shifting foundations of quality in higher education before offering some brief reflections on university governance and ERA.
### Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACG</td>
<td>Australian Competitive Grant</td>
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<td>ARC</td>
<td>Australian Research Council</td>
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<td>AUC</td>
<td>Australian Universities Commission</td>
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<td>AUQA</td>
<td>Australian Universities Quality Agency</td>
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<td>CRN</td>
<td>Collaborative Research Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>CQAHE</td>
<td>Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</td>
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<td>CTEC</td>
<td>Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEET</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Training</td>
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<td>DEETYA</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
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<td>DEST</td>
<td>Department of Education, Science and Training</td>
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<td>DEEWR</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations</td>
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<td>DIISR</td>
<td>Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research</td>
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<td>EAG</td>
<td>Expert Advisory Group</td>
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<td>ERA</td>
<td>Excellence in Research for Australia</td>
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<td>FoR</td>
<td>Field of Research</td>
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<td>HEC</td>
<td>Higher Education Council</td>
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<td>NBEET</td>
<td>National Board of Education, Employment and Training</td>
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<td>PRF</td>
<td>Performance-based research funding</td>
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<td>RQF</td>
<td>Research Quality Framework</td>
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<td>RTS</td>
<td>Research Training Scheme</td>
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<td>SRE</td>
<td>Sustainable Research Excellence</td>
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<td>TC</td>
<td>Transparent Costing</td>
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<td>TEQSA</td>
<td>Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority</td>
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<td>UofE</td>
<td>Unit of Evaluation</td>
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ERA

ERA and the performance regime in Australian Higher Education: A review of the policy context

Case study: The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative

The performance instrument

In 2008, Senator Kim Carr announced a new metrics based, research evaluation initiative, the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), to be developed by the Australian Research Council (ARC) in conjunction with the Australian Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR). The Senator (Carr, 2008a) stated that:

> Australia is about to embark on a transparent, workable system to assess the quality of home-grown research... For the first time we will be able to measure our achievements against our peers around the world, and plan the future of research investment. The Commonwealth invests billions each year in research. The ERA model will provide hard evidence that taxpayers are getting the best bang for their buck in this critical area. (¶ 3-5)

The initiative has now become embedded within Australian university life and has been argued to represent:

> a full-scale transformation of Australian universities into a culture of audit...[that] threatens to alter and in all likelihood undermine the capacity for universities to produce innovative and critical thought. To say this is not to argue that these things will no longer exist, but that they will decline as careers, research decisions, cultures of academic debate and reading are distorted by ERA. (Cooper & Poletti, 2011, p. 57)

Accordingly, ERA has been met with trepidation by some members of the university research community as a consequence of its perceived capacity to radically alter the working lives, careers and fields of research for Australian academics (Kwok, 2013).

The first ERA process was undertaken in 2010, the second occurred in 2012 and expected thereafter every three years. This process requires institutions to collect data from individual researchers on their research activity aligned to eight discipline clusters. Data collected across the eight discipline clusters are allocated to two- and four-digit Field of Research (FoR) codes, as identified in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ABS & Statistics NZ, 2008). The four-digit code serves as the Unit of Evaluation (UofE) although if there is insufficient research activity to meet the minimum threshold needed for analysis, the data is aggregated and then evaluated at the two-digit level. In order to report on the disciplines at the national level, evaluation occurs across universities at the two-and four-digit levels.

As research within these clusters can occur across a number of faculties or research centres, it is necessary for each institution to coordinate the collected data in order for the university submission to accurately portray its research activity. Consequently, expert groups are utilised to provide
strategic advice on how to present the data to the ARC. These groups are able to draw on a confidential citation benchmark document, provided by the ARC to submitting institutions.

Following submission, the ARC, through its appointed expert panels of peers, evaluates the collected data to develop a national outcome report on institutional performance in each of the discipline clusters at both four and two digit levels, based on a 1-5 scale. This rating scale is argued to be “broadly consistent with the approach taken in research evaluation exercises in countries to allow for international comparison where appropriate” (Australian Research Council, 2011c, p. 5). The ERA 2010 scale is described in Table 1.

The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) aims to:

1. Establish an evaluation framework that gives government, industry, business and the wider community assurance of the excellence of research conducted in Australia’s higher education institutions.
2. Provide a national stocktake of discipline-level areas of research strength and areas where there is opportunity for development in Australia’s higher education institutions.
3. Identify excellence across the full spectrum of research performance.
4. Identify emerging research areas and opportunities for further development.
5. Allow for comparisons of Australia’s research national and internationally for all discipline areas. (Australian Research Council, 2011c pg.1)

Table 1. ERA rating scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Unit of Evaluation profile is characterised by evidence of outstanding performance well above world standard presented by the suite of indicators used for evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Unit of Evaluation profile is characterised by evidence of performance above world standard presented by the suite of indicators used for evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Unit of Evaluation profile is characterised by evidence of average performance at world standard presented by the suite of indicators used for evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Unit of Evaluation profile is characterised by evidence of performance below world standard presented by the suite of indicators used for evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Unit of Evaluation profile is characterised by evidence of performance well below world standard presented by the suite of indicators used for evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Not assessed due to low volume. The number of research outputs does not meet the volume threshold standard for evaluation in ERA.</td>
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</table>
These evaluations of research performance are made against four categories of indicators drawing on principles described as being “valid and robust” (Australian Research Council, 2008 pg.1) measures of research quality for a particular discipline. The four categories (Australian Research Council, 2011c pg. 2) are:

1. Indicators of research quality.
2. Indicators of research volume and activity.
3. Indicators of research application.
4. Indicators of recognition.

The reference period for research quality covers six years of research outputs, while all other indicators are aligned to a three year time frame. Table 2 displays the variations in the core indicator between ERA 2010 and ERA 2012 and their associated reference periods.

**Table 2. ERA core indicators in 2010 & 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2010 (Australian Research Council, 2011c pg.2)</th>
<th>Reference period</th>
<th>2012 (Australian Research Council, 2011b pp. 9-10)</th>
<th>Reference period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Volume and activity evaluated by:</td>
<td>Total research outputs, research income and other research items within the context of the profile of eligible researchers</td>
<td>Jan. 2006-Dec. 2008 (3 years)</td>
<td>Total research outputs, research income and other research items within the context of the profile of eligible researchers</td>
<td>Jan. 2008-Dec. 2010 (3 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Application evaluated by:</td>
<td>Research commercialisation income and other applied measures</td>
<td>Jan. 2006-Dec. 2008 (3 years)</td>
<td>Research commercialisation income, Plant Breeder’s Rights, registered designs, and NHMRC guidelines. Some other measures such as publishing behaviour and some other categories of research income can also provide information about research application</td>
<td>Jan. 2008-Dec. 2010 (3 years)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The UofE are assessed against the indicators by eight, discipline specific, Research Evaluation Committees, guided by journal and citation benchmarks provided by the Australian Research Council (Australian Research Council, 2011a). In 2010, this benchmarking drew on three bibliometric measures:

1. Relative citation impact (RCI), calculated against Australian HEP [higher education providers] and world benchmarks
2. Distribution of articles against RCI classes
3. Distribution of articles based on world centile thresholds and Australian HEP average.

(Australian Research Council, 2011a, p. 1)

The ARC draws on Scopus, an abstract and citation database, to provide citation information. As well, Australian benchmarks were developed from compilations of indexed journal articles from the 2010 submissions.¹

**Development**

With the launch of ERA, Australia initiated its third interpretation of a performance-based research funding (PRF) system (Hicks, 2012) cementing its commitment to a global trend. Hicks’s analysis of fourteen international PRF systems identified several challenges to their design. These included the use of peer review and metrics, the accommodation of differences across research fields, lengthy consultation with the academic community, the transparency of data and access to results as well as recognition of the dynamic consequences of the evaluation process (Hicks, 2012).

To some extent, the design of ERA has attempted to overcome some of these challenges with varying degrees of success. For example Hicks (2012) argues that the use of databases such as Scopus privileges scientific fields over the social sciences and the humanities and is therefore problematic, however the highly consultative nature of ERA reflects an attempt at procedural fairness. Unlike other countries, despite the general rhetoric of transparency and accountability, ERA data is unavailable due to confidentiality issues (Sheil, March 2, 2011) and “weightings given to various components of information available to committees are not known” (Hicks, 2012 pg. 256). As such, the global report card on the design of ERA is still somewhat uncertain. However, as no single, ideological model currently exists for PRF systems (Hicks, 2012), ERA represents a particular Australian variant of a higher education performance management system.

Prior to ERA, Australia had evaluated research initially through the Composite Index and the Research Quality Framework (RQF) described in more detail below. As the unit of analysis are research fields and it employs peer review informed by bibliometric measure, ERA as a variant of PRF has been argued to be the state-of-the-art (Hicks, 2012). Although funding is relatively low, and sits beside other PRF arrangements, Hicks comments that this forefront in Australia’s design:

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¹ Full details of the derivation and calculation of the citation benchmarks is detailed in (Australian Research Council, 2011a)
incorporates highly consultative processes in which the government gathers input from universities using comment periods, and evaluation processes designed by expert panels made up of representatives of university or field-based associations. (2012 pg.255)

Significantly, ERA 2010 as the first full scale implementation of the initiative, employed weighted categories of journals. This journal ranking process involved scholarly communities deciding on the most suitable metrics for their fields. This consultation resulted in the 2008 release of a list containing over 19,500 journals assigned to 181 FoR codes (Lamp, 2009). Each journal was assigned a single rank of excellence (A*, A, B or C). The list was eventually converted to a database and made available on the internet where it received 64,000 hits over a six month period from both domestic and international visitors (Lamp, 2009). It has been argued that the ARC had stated that it would use discipline specific tiered journal rankings as an indicator of research quality ², the implication being that ERA ranked journal was the gauge of excellence (Lamp, 2009). At the time, Lamp believed that the ranking exercise would provide institutional motivation to apply pressure on their academics to publish in highly ranked outlets. He argued that:

> the investment of effort by the ARC into creating and maintaining this list will compel them to get maximum return on that investment by expanding its use. Either way, a change in publishing behaviour by Australian academics can be expected...The ERA journal ranking exercise has the potential to dramatically change the landscape of academic publishing in Australia. The precise nature and extent of those changes are yet to be made apparent. The process is being watched keenly in other countries and the mere existence of the journal ranking list is significant and could have wider effects. (2009, p. 829)

Although journal rankings were positioned as just one indicator for research evaluation in ERA 2010, it received considerable critical attention across the Australian academic community. This extended beyond the concerns held for its effects on journal publishers, to issues concerning the academics decision making in relation to careers and fields of study (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Cooper & Poletti, 2011; Hardy, Heimans, & Lingard, 2011; Haslam & Koval, 2010; Young, Peetz, & Marais, 2011). In a survey of academics within the field of employment relations, Young et al. (2011) reported that “84 per cent [claimed] that the ERA journal ranking had replaced traditional decision-making or evaluative criteria” (p. 80). Such findings suggest a shift from the traditional form of autonomy held by researchers to one motivated by institutional objectives.

In response to the concerns over the journal rankings, Margaret Sheil as the CEO of the ARC was reported (Rowbotham, 2010 November 3) as saying:

> “We codified a behaviour that was there anyway”, she said “Our rankings made it easier for senior people to say to researchers: ‘You are not publishing in good enough journals’”. But she did not approve of pressure being applied

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² See http://www.arc.gov.au/era/era_2010/archive/era_journal_list.htm
in this way. “Universities are using it in ways that are more rigid than I would,” she said. “If I was back in a university, I would not be trying to use it for purposes other than what was intended”. (¶ 7)

Accordingly, it would seem that the ARC was aware of the motivating potential of the journal rankings for institutions as a driver of quality improvement despite an acknowledgement that this was resulting in perverse effects. The codification of behaviour in this instance is presented as the tool through which institutions would be empowered to control its academic staff, yet this control of the organisation is also argued to be beyond the reach of the ARC.

Following the publication of the ERA 2010 report, the ARC opened the 2012 journal list for public consultation (from February 14 to April 4, 2011). By May, in response to received feedback, the government announced that it would refine “the journal quality indicator to remove the prescriptive A*, A, B and C ranks” (Carr, May 30, 2011) and introduce journal quality profiles. The publication profile would indicate “the most frequently published journals for each unit of evaluation” (Carr, May 30, 2011, p. 2). Senator Carr commented that:

There is consistent evidence that the rankings were being deployed inappropriately within some quarters of the sector in ways that could produce harmful outcomes. One common example was the setting of targets for publication in A and A* journals by institutional research managers…The journals lists will still be of great utility and importance, but the removal of the ranks and the provision of the publication profile will ensure they will be used descriptively rather than prescriptively. (May 30, 2011, pp. 2-3)

This sudden turn around on such a prominent component of the initial ERA process, suggests that although the ARC had acknowledged potential risks, they may not have been fully prepared for the perverse effects of the ERA ranking. In addition, this marks a departure from international trends in weighting journals in PRF systems.

In general, Hicks’ analysis of PRF systems suggests some concern with the costs and benefits of these evaluation processes. This is particularly difficult as the exercise incurs “indirect costs for universities that compile submissions and direct costs for the evaluation of those submissions” (Hicks, 2012, p. 256). More significantly, Hicks argues that PRF systems can pose additional pressure on governments to increase research funding, particularly from those universities who have demonstrated their outstanding research ranking.

Of interest to Hicks is the connection between PRF systems and the relatively small financial rewards for universities attached to performance. Here she argues that the main motivator for performance is less about the financial incentives and more about the competition for a prestigious ranking, stating that “Universities compete for prestige, and PRFSs harness this” (2012, p. 258).

Finally, Hicks asserts that the introduction of PRF systems “creates tensions between autonomy and control (2012, p. 258), both in relation to institutions and individuals. Specifically, she mentions the example of ERA’s wide and extensive consultation with the academic community occurring within
the boundaries established by the ARC. In addition, she refers to the belief that PRF systems provide a mechanism to restrict self-autonomy through the enhancement of “disciplinary elites” (2012, p. 259).

Utilisation of ERA data

The national dataset made possible from the ERA evaluations is used in a number of ways. Primarily, ERA informs decisions in relation to the Sustainable Research Excellence (SRE) program, the Research Training Scheme (RTS) and the Government’s compacts with universities, which are briefly outlined below. In addition ERA is used to inform the Governments Research Workforce Strategy and more indirectly the minimum research standards developed by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA).

Sustainable Research Excellence (SRE) Program

The SRE program emerged from the policy paper Powering Ideas: An innovation agenda for the 21st Century (DIISR, 2009), directed at harnessing Australia’s research potential to drive international competitiveness whilst receiving “the highest possible dividend from its investment” (DIISR, 2011b). The initiative provides a block grant to cover the shortfall in indirect costs of competitive grant research (Australian Competitive Grant- ACG). As a block grant, funds are allocated on a performance based formula. The SRE program is directed at:

- [increasing] the number of research groups performing at world-class levels; and
- [supporting] high quality universities that can deliver world class research that drives and supports innovation now and in the future.

In particular...SRE’s focus is to:

- support and build research excellence; and
- secure the sustainability of research over the longer term. (DIISR, 2011b, p. 4)

Accordingly, the SRE is designed to meet infrastructure costs of research as well as build institutional capacity, develop research quality and extend research performance. In this respect, the SRE distinguishes itself from other block grants with its recognition that “achieving research excellence on a sustainable basis is dependent on a university’s capacity to strategically manage its resources to meet the costs associated with research activities” (Ratnatunga & Waldmann, 2010, p. 2). Consequently, the program provides financial incentives and mechanisms to effect institutional change.

Following consultation with the higher education sector, several models were proposed as to how ERA, in conjunction with a Transparent Costing (TC) exercise ³, would be utilised to establish the funding formula (Ratnatunga & Waldmann, 2010). Funding allocated for 2012 and 2013 is derived

³ A framework for identifying indirect costs associated with Australian Competitive Grants.
directly from ERA outcomes of 2010, while the methodology for 2014 allocations draws from ERA 2012. The eventual model announced in 2012 provides additional funding for those universities who participated in the TC and the ERA processes (threshold 1) and a further share in funding for those institutions receiving an ERA FoR score of 3 and above (threshold 2). ERA scores of 1 or 2 receive a zero weighting in the allocation of this proportion of the SRE funding formulae. Accordingly, institutions not only receive financial incentives for participating in ERA, but are also advantaged by high scores in the FoR ranking.

**Research Training Scheme (RTS)**

The RTS is a block grant serving as a tuition scheme for postgraduate study. Introduced in 1999, the initiative, in combination with the Institutional Grant Scheme, brought performance-based funding to research and research training (Larkins, 2011). The funding formula applied to the scheme is heavily influenced by performance indicators, “leading to the desired consequences of differentiated research income” (Moses, 2007, p. 270) across institutions.

Following from Minister Carr’s *Powering Ideas* policy agenda, the Government proposed a substantial injection of funding in the scheme to develop a research workforce with viable careers. Accordingly, a review of the RTS was initiated resulting in the release of a consultation paper, *Defining Quality for Research Training in Australia* (DIISR, 2011a) directed at identifying meaningful measures to drive improvement. This was to be followed by a second paper specifically detailing how ERA outcomes would be used to allocate RTS funding (DIISR, 2011a). 4

However, Palmer (2011) argues that the Government has conflated the quality of research and performance measures of research training, and then linked this to the ERA process. Here the Government has stated that:

> A key part of providing HDR [Higher Degree Research] students with a quality training experience is ensuring that they are learning in an environment where quality research is taking place. Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) provides an improved mechanism to assess the quality and scale of research activity undertaken at higher education institutions. (DIISR, 2011a, p. 17)

Palmer (2011) argues that as ERA does not include the publication activity of research students and only appears to give some indication that a critical mass of potential supervisors exist at particular institution, it will struggle to provide even indirect measures of research training by virtue of its design. In this respect, even though ERA does not measure the quality of research training, it appears that ERA data will be used as a proxy. Accordingly, Palmer (2011) also states that the use of ERA to determine funding of research student places or scholarships could result in perverse incentives rather than improvement in the quality of research training.

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4 The ERA 2012 submission guidelines indicate that outcomes will inform funding of research training (ARC, 2011, p. 10).
Mission-based compacts
In 2009, the Government released the discussion paper Mission-based Compacts for Universities: A framework for discussion (DEEWR & DIISR, 2009), describing a funding initiative that would:

mark the start of a new relationship between the Government and higher education institutions. It will be based on mutual respect, trust and shared goals to improve students’ educational experience and outcomes and to build research capacity and international competitiveness. (DEEWR & DIISR, 2009, p. 1)

The compacts are composed of three parts: 1) a mission statement and details as to how the institution would fulfil that mission; 2) a teaching and learning component outlining their commitment to national priorities and targets for performance funding; and 3) a research component addressing national priorities in research and research training as well as detailing how funding would be used to meet institutional and government policy objectives (DEEWR & DIISR, 2009).

Accordingly, the compacts serve as a negotiation tool between universities and the Government to identify performance targets that would “trigger reward payments” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 47) and facilitate “a streamlined funding and accountability framework” (DEEWR & DIISR, 2009, p. 5). Here the incentive payments are linked to the SRE program and therefore indirectly to the weighting of the ERA scores and the Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program designed to link smaller universities to institutions with greater research capacity and success. The accountability and performance aspect is addressed through the Government’s monitoring and evaluation of institutions and the annual production of portfolios on each university, drawing on multiple sources of statistical data including ERA outcomes.

The compacts discussion paper (DEEWR & DIISR, 2009) argued that as the compacts would allow for the negotiation of funding based on:

a university’s performance and their agreed indirect costs of research. This will lead to changes in the distribution of block funding and drive greater institutional differentiation. Over time this will be reflected in universities’ mission statements, funding bids and overall performance. (p. 7)

Accordingly, the compacts serve as a possible tool to drive differentiation towards a multi-layered higher education sector (Hare & Trounson, February 02, 2011) to distinguish teaching focused from research intensive universities. Thus, ERA outcomes identify those institutions that could partner with poor performing universities in order to build research capacity.

Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority
Established under the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act 2011, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA) is the newly formed regulatory body with responsibility for establishing higher education standards and the auditing and accreditation of universities. All higher education providers are required to register with TEQSA whose role it will be to monitor provider
ERA standards, qualification standards, teaching and learning standards, information standards and research standards.

Although TEQSA has yet to produce the Research Standards, ERA data is expected to play a role in monitoring the standards administered by TEQSA and the academy has been left to wonder how ERA will be utilised. In a 2010 newspaper article it was reported that:

Margaret Sheil said that ERA rating scale had been recalibrated, creating more differentiation at the lower end, partly with a view to its future use by TEQSA (Lane, September 09, 2010).

Accordingly, while the role of ERA in TEQSA’s research standards is still uncertain, it would appear that the ARC are making preparations for its data to be used for benchmarking.

**Part 1- Policy context**

In a 2010 speech to the Australian Technology Universities Network, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Senator Carr, provided some insight into the Government’s policy strategy when he stated that:

ERA will have a huge impact on the higher education sector – a transformational impact. This is not a curiosity-driven exercise. We are not gathering data for [the] sake of it. We expect the lessons we learn from ERA to change the culture and drive reform across the system...This may well influence academic mobility, publication preferences, student enrolments, and the capacity of institutions to secure external funding. [Universities] are wrestling with the question of what ERA might mean for [their] capacity to attract researchers, research students, overseas undergraduate students, and foreign investment in university-based research. This is precisely the kind of question I want you thinking about. Every university in the country should be asking itself how the results of ERA will make it look internationally. If the answer is ‘not too flash’, then it will be my turn to ask questions, starting with ‘What are you going to do about it?’ (Carr, 2010, p. 3)

Accordingly, the Government has expectations that the ERA process will: (a) serve as the mechanism for fundamental change across Australian universities; (b) have effects in a wide range of areas that may or may not be directly linked to research outputs; and (c) provide international performance benchmarks against which universities will be held to account.

This policy summary broadly touches on many of these issues in an attempt to position ERA in the complex web of policy trends and initiatives that have dominated Australian higher education. It begins by considering government-institutional relations, coordinating and buffering bodies and the emergence of the enterprise university as the policy context for increased accountability. This is followed by part two that provides some insights into the rationale behind the Rudd/Gillard reforms via an examination of the shifting foundations of quality assurance in Australian higher education. The summary concludes with some brief reflections on university governance and ERA.
Commonwealth-Institutional relations

Higher education in Australia is predominated by autonomous universities as statutory bodies, established under Federal, State or Territory\(^5\) legislation. There are 39 publicly funded and two private universities as well as one Australian branch of an overseas institution. Constitutionally, universities are the responsibility of the States and Territories, however funding responsibility remains with the Commonwealth government who finances student places and provides research funding through competitive and block grants\(^6\) under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). Therefore, the Commonwealth as the primary source of university funding, able to exert considerable influence on institutional management, now serves as the primary source of higher education policy (DEST, 2007).

As statutory bodies, Australian universities are required to meet both State and Federal level financial accountability requirements. Universities provide annual reports that are tabled in State Parliaments as well as audited financial statements to State ministers (Meek & Hayden, 2005). Accountability to the Commonwealth has been met in the past through the production of educational profile documents (described in further detail below) and since 2009 through the mission-based compacts. In short, as self-governing institutions, universities have a substantial history in accounting for their expenditure of public finances (Baird, 2010).

While at one point, universities were looked upon as “separate, sovereign institutions” (Marginson & Considine, 2001, p. 20), the relationship between State and universities has now evolved to one that is generally recognised as one *steering from a distance* (Marginson & Considine, 2001). Up until the late 1980s, universities had a high degree of autonomy with substantive control over work practices in research and teaching. Ferlie et al. (2008) describe this era as one where “Academics…receive[d] a monopoly from the state to exercise their function. The state agree[d] to protect them from the external influences, as long as the academic community implement[ed] norms, values and practices preventing an abusive use of their knowledge” (p. 327).

In 1974, the Commonwealth assumed responsibility for universities, and under Labor reforms provided students free access to tertiary education. Marginson and Carsidine (2001) argue that while these reforms drew the Federal government further into higher education policy, the focus was predominantly on financing rather than the outcomes of higher education and “policy development was still ranked low” (p. 24). However, the Dawkins era of the mid 1980s marked a major policy ‘turn’ in Commonwealth-institutional relations.

During an era of economic uncertainty, the Hawke Government (1983-91) implemented a more management centred perspective on the public sector (Marginson & Considine, 2001). John Dawkins, the Minister for Education and Training at the time, critiqued the higher education sector for its management practices (Marginson & Considine, 2001) arguing that “Rigidities and

\footnotesize{\(^5\) Further use of the term “State” should be read as both State and Territory
\(^6\) A history of higher education funding policy from 1950 through to 2003 is available from: http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/hefunding}
inefficiencies at the institutional level are generated by too few incentives and other barriers to staff performance” (Dawkins, 1987, p. 3). He proposed the use of “financial and other advantages” (Dawkins, 1987, p. 3) as a carrot to institutions willing to adopt “principles and practices considered to be for the general community good” (Dawkins, 1987, p. 3). This would require universities to develop institutional profiles, identifying their particular strengths, and these would form the basis of funding discussions with the Government.

Marginson and Considine (2001) argue that Dawkin’s reforms of 1987-1989, marked a seismic shift in government-university relations with a government rationality focused on the creation of quasi markets and the corporatisation of universities. Dawkin’s position was that universities were industries that would be administered under a government department “with a clear economic objective” (Marginson & Considine, 2001, p. 30).

The reforms (Dawkins, 1987, 1988) heralded a unified national system of higher education, merging colleges of advanced education, technical and further education institutions focused on vocational teaching to either create new universities or to be absorbed within established universities with long histories of professional teaching and research traditions. In addition, there was an increase in student places with an emphasis on fields thought likely to have an impact on the economy’s recovery and growth. Specific policies were targeted at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of management. To deliver greater control over higher education resources, Dawkins abolished the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC) that had served as the buffering body between the Government and universities (discussed in greater detail below). Finally a more selective approach to research funding was established with the creation of the ARC. Harman (1989) argues, that while the reforms reflected international trends in higher education at the time, their speed and scope was far greater than in other countries.

Marginson and Considine (2001) propose that the Dawkins reforms established a new model of federal governance underpinned by the approach that “Only government policy should direct the major allocations within higher education and all else should follow the dictates of good management” (p. 35). This they argue was a form of government control via the reorganisation of university management.

Dawkins (1988) viewed university governing councils as too large to be effective and representative of too wide a range of institutional interests that had implications for efficient decision making. His preference was a reduction in council size, a strengthening of executive leadership and the pursuit of a corporate model of governance (Marginson & Considine, 2001). Consequently, Dawkins promoted his higher education reforms as an:

- opportunity to adopt appropriate forms of legislation which meet the dual objectives of participative decision making and an effective structure for accountability…While the Commonwealth has no role in dictating management structures to institutions, it has a legitimate interest in developing the capacity of institutions to meet their own objectives and to
contribute to the achievement of broader national goals for higher education (Dawkins, 1988, pp. 102-103).

Accordingly, the Commonwealth pursued reform in individual university management, through State legislation (Marginson & Considine, 2001) in an attempt to develop institutional focus on national ambitions.

In the government issues paper Meeting the challenges: The governance and management of universities (DEST, 2002), concerns with university governance was also taken up by the Coalition Government. Again there was focus on the pivotal role of university governing bodies and the need to ensure the quality of their management capacity. However this was couched in terms related to the minimisation of government intervention. Here it was stated that:

The Commonwealth Government is committed to reducing bureaucratic intervention in the management of universities. It recognises that reporting can be costly and time consuming. However, the extent to which it can pull back in terms of monitoring and reporting requirements will depend upon two things: (a) the confidence it has in university governance; and (b) the extent to which an agreement can be reached on outcome measures to replace unnecessary emphasis on process and inputs (DEST, 2002, p. x).

Accordingly, the Coalition, keen to free universities to participate in the market for student places, was also concerned with the leadership, competence and accountability of university management. This eventually led to the development of eleven National Governance Protocols linked to incentive funding and financial penalties (DEST, 2003). Of particular significance was the use of the protocols to restrict the size and composition of governing bodies. Vidovich and Currie (2011) comment that under these protocols:

There had to be a majority of external independent members, and it was specified that they should neither be students nor employees of the provider. In effect, this would marginalise the voices of academics and students from the ‘heartland’ of universities (p. 47).

In light of this, Australia entered into a phase of tightly controlled government-institutional relations geared towards the corporatisation of university governance and the exclusion of the academic voice. Vidovich and Currie (2011) have argued that as the protocol required increased and intense interactions between internal and external layers of governance in combination with the threat of financial sanctions for non-compliance, the relationship between the Commonwealth and institutions was one of deep mistrust on both sides.

With the 2007 return of the Labor party to Federal government, the protocols and their sanctions were quickly removed in an effort to restore trust with the academy (Vidovich & Currie, 2011). With this in mind, it is worth considering the history of formal bodies that existed at the nexus between institutions and government as indicators of the shifting nature of relations.
Coordinating and buffering bodies
As in other countries Australia has had a varied history of intermediary buffering bodies. Marshall (1990) has argued that the evolution of these bodies emerged from a belief that:

The positioning of an intermediary...between government and institution was...essential, not only to safeguard the autonomy of campuses from political interference, but also to ensure impartiality in the sensitive arena of commonwealth-state relations (p. 148).

However in 2002, Brendan Nelson as the Minister for Education, Science and Training, commented that “Over the years Australia has experimented with ‘buffer’ bodies responsible for making decisions on the allocation of student places and funding, or for advising the Government on policy. Australia currently does not have such a body”(2002, p. 5). Thus with the new millennium the imperative for maintaining some agency to negotiate competing demands across the sector appeared to have ended. Meek and Hayden (2005) interpreted Nelson’s apparent disinterest in buffering bodies as a mask for a much greater interest in facilitating direct Ministerial control of the higher education sector.

To some extent these bodies have provided an institutional sense of autonomy (King, 2009) during particular policy eras. However, as illustrated below, the roles of these bodies have shifted from providing policy direction reflecting institutional needs towards one of regulating in favour of governmental needs. Given Marshall’s comments, this may be related to the Commonwealth’s increasing dominance over State control of higher education.

- **Australian Universities Commission – 1959-1977**
The Australian Universities Commission (AUC) was established in 1959 as an independent body to oversee the distribution of capital funding and recurrent grants. It serves as Australia’s first organisation designed as a coordinating or buffering agency between institutions and the government (Harman, 1984). Modelled on the British Universities Grants Commission, the AUC emerged at a time when the Federal government was under increased pressure to accept greater responsibility for university planning and financing (Harman, 1984). Harman argues that:

  on balance, [the AUC was] ...a successful mechanism in planning university development nationally and in providing detailed advice to government, and it enjoyed, in the main, strong support from individual universities, from the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, and from successive Commonwealth and state governments (1984, p. 501).

As such, the AUC maintained considerable support across both the higher education sector and levels of government. The Commission provided detailed triennial reports on universities to the Government, reviewing developments, identifying priorities and outlining financial recommendations. However, Harman also points out that the AUC was unable to reconcile the financial demands of universities with the extent of the Government’s willingness or capacity to
spend, and as a result by the end of its tenure there was considerable conflict and tension between the agency and the Commonwealth.

- **Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission – 1977-1987**
  From 1977 the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC), a statutory authority, provided policy advice on university funding requirements and had responsibility for administering Commonwealth financial grants (Marshall, 1988). Accordingly, the Commission had substantial responsibility for both the formulation and implementation of tertiary education policy (Marshall, 1990).

  During its first eight years, Marshall comments that “it earned an impressive reputation for the stability, coherence and higher standards in policy-making” (1990, p. 147). The formulation of higher education policy for government consideration, was conducted through a triennial cycle involving negotiations across institutions and both levels of government (Marshall, 1990). Although time consuming, this consultative process led to thorough debate, analysis, agreed upon course of action resulting in “policy advice of a higher order” (Marshall, 1990, p. 151). However, Marshall argues that the neo-liberal and administrative reforms of the mid 1980s, altered the administrative context of the Commission in such a way to undermine its performance. There was a surge of interest by other government departments in the goings on of higher education with the recognition that universities had a role to play in the economic and social future of the country. As a consequence, higher education policy was dissipated to a number of different agencies.

  By 1987, the CTEC was quickly abolished by Dawkins 7, in a move to reaffirm Labor’s intention to establish greater Ministerial control over the implementation of university policy (Marshall, 1988; Meek & Hayden, 2005). Marshall (1988) argues that its abolition marked a major change in the style of higher education policy making at the Commonwealth level as the formulation and implementation responsibilities fell directly onto the Australian **Department of Education, Employment and Training** (DEET).

- **National Board of Employment, Education and Training – 1987-1996**
  The **National Board of Employment, Education and Training** (NBEET) was created to advise the newly created super ministry (DEET) on the development of tertiary institutions, although it had no regulatory or implementation authority. As the Board’s scope extended beyond higher education to include employment programs, schools, skills training, research and industry involvement, it included four subordinate councils: the Schools Councils, the **Higher Education Council** (HEC), the Employment and Skills Formation Council and the Australian Research Council (ARC) (Marshall, 1990). Significantly, while NBEET submitted proposals, responsibility for policy production and implementation was with the Minister and his Department.

  A 1994 review of NBEET (Wiltshire, 1994), commissioned by the Labor Government, reported that while the organisation had fulfilled most of the expectations held for it, its effectiveness depended

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7 A number of other agencies in other ministries were also abolished at the same time.
“on the extent to which Ministers use[d] it to provide the kind of advice for which it was established: expert, representative, medium- to long-term, frank and fearless independent advice.” (Wiltshire, 1994, p. ix). By 1996 the Board had been wound down, although the HEC and ARC were retained.

- **Higher Education Council 1987-1998**

The Higher Education Council (HEC) took over CTEC’s advisory responsibilities in 1987, while CTEC’s coordinating role was transferred to the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) (Meek & Hayden, 2005). With the abolition of NBEET in 1996, HEC was re-established as a statutory body. Senator Vanstone as the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs announced the creation of the HEC and the Australian Research Council (ARC) in her budget statement in 1996, indicating that the agencies formed part of a more strategic relationship between the Commonwealth and tertiary institutions directed at creating a “less interventionist role in relation to its advisory structures, industrial relations issues, and accountability requirements” (Vanstone, 1996, p. viii). However, by 1998 the Council was disbanded by the new Minister, David Kemp.

- **Australian Research Council – 2001 (Mark 2)- present**

Although the Australian Research Council (ARC) had formally existed under the NBEET until 1996, legislation to abolish the Board did not occur until 2000. Consequently, from 1996 to 2001, the ARC provided advice on research programs that were administered through DEET and later DEETYA
8 (Larkins, 2011). By 1999, it was announced that the ARC would have its own Act of Parliament in an effort to strengthen its role, independence, accountability and transparency (Larkins, 2011). Accordingly the council was formally re-established in 2001 as an independent statutory authority to coordinate research and researching training funding. The council’s decision making takes place within the Government’s policy focus on national research priorities and the enhancement of competition across institutions for research funding (Goedegebuure, Hayden, & Meek, 2009).

Larkins comments that the ARC’s :

> strength has been the close involvement of the research community in the peer review decision-making grant processes. Over the years remarkably few criticisms have been made concerning the operational side of the ARC processes (2011, p. 149).

In this regard, as a coordinating body, it has relied heavily on the engagement of the academic community within its own processes.

However, in 2005 Minister Nelson announced his intention to abolish the ARC’s governing board in response to a report on the corporate governance of statutory authorities
9. This was argued to be a move directed at improving transparency and accountability. Consequently, the ARC was placed under an executive management system of governance, in other words a CEO who reported directly to the Minister. The elimination of the board created considerable concern that the buffering effect of

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8 The Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.
9 The Uhrig report
the ARC would be undermined with loss of an “additional safeguard between the Minister and the peer review process” (Allport, 2006, p. 5).

In 2008, in response to Brendan Nelson’s (as the Coalition Minister for Education) interference in the selection of research grant allocations (Lane, July 18, 2007; Rood, November 16, 2005), the incoming Labor Government announced the establishment of an independent Advisory Council to provide the ARC with “non-binding strategic and policy advice” (Carr, 2008b).

- **Australian Universities Quality Agency – 2001-2011**

  The establishment of the [Australian Universities Quality Agency](#) (AUQA) in 2001 provided a regulatory agency for both institutions as well as State authorities. AUQA had responsibilities for auditing universities as well as those authorities overseeing the National Protocols, registration and accreditation of universities (Baird, 2010). The five-yearly audits resulted in reports on institutional performance and provided recommendations for improvements.

  However the increased focus on quality, standards, efficiency and effectiveness is thought to have had an impact on AUQA’s original objectives (Baird, 2010; Woodhouse, 2010). While initially established as a flexible quality assurance structure to enable individual, institutional improvement, the organisation’s work eventually evolved into one of threshold checking against external requirements for accreditation purposes (Woodhouse, 2010).

  AUQA has been described as being moderately successful in establishing itself with universities, as a trustworthy agency (Baird, 2010). In this regard, the reports were seen as credible by both institution and governments alike. As a consequence Reid suggested that the “AUQA process [was] clearly used by university managers to assist them in engaging in the marketplace to demonstrate competitive advantage. It is perhaps impossible for a national audit body to avoid being used as a tool in the global marketplace” (2009, p. 590). This might suggest a somewhat canny relationship between AUQA and institutions, perhaps facilitated by the relative lack of authority held by the agency.

  The Bradley review argued that AUQA’s organisation was inadequate as an accreditation agency due to its lack of power if universities failed to meet performance criteria. One of the review’s key recommendations was the replacement of AUQA with a new “independent ‘buffer body’ to carry out [the] functions” (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 215) of reporting and accreditation against nationally consistent standards.

- **Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority – 2011- present**

  The disestablishment of AUQA and the creation of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA) marked a subtle shift in governance responsibility. While AUQA served as a representative agency of all States, TEQSA is owned by the Federal government implying a considerable transference of power (Baird, 2010).
Gallagher (2011) has argued that the initial drafting of the TEQSA legislation was problematic and punitive, requiring fast renegotiation with the higher education sector to include an appeals mechanism. He commented that:

It is regrettable that institutional safeguards have had to be pursued via legalistic channels rather than through policy dialogue. But the Government had locked itself in long before its proposals became apparent, and the new Minister has had little room for policy shifts in a Government that is sensitive about its ‘reform’ implementation track record. (p. 5)

This suggests that the collaborative and consultative relationship once evident between institutes and the state (and made possible via bodies such as CTEC), has clearly been replaced by a top-down and reactive policy design strategy. As such, TEQSA marks a move towards more centralised regulation of Australian universities.

At the time of its establishment, Senator Evans (March 01, 2011), as the Minister for Tertiary Education, stated that TEQSA would take over regulatory and quality assurance responsibilities to “reduce the number or federal, state and territory agencies from nine to one” (¶16). Significantly, he implied that TEQSA would enable a “hands-off” approach to governance for some higher education providers with the comment that “TEQSA will enshrine a risk-based approach which will take into account the scale, mission and history of each provider and allow higher quality, lower risk providers to operate without unnecessary intrusion” (¶18). Thus the implication was that quality universities, presumably identified through audits and ERA rankings, would retain their autonomy, while underperforming institutions would be subject to closer monitoring. To this effect, he went on to comment:

Some have argued that the creation of a national regulator will open the door to political intrusion into university affairs. My view is that precisely the opposite will happen. Operating at arm’s length from the Government of the day, TEQSA will act as a bulwark against inappropriate political interference...Australia has a proud tradition of universities which are fiercely independent. That is a tradition which I intend to defend. (¶19-33)

In response and in opposition to Minister Carr’s position, Gallagher (2011) argued that the TEQSA legislation serves to empower ministers, not an independent body, to set teaching and learning and research standards with a minimal level of constraint.

The transformation of Australian public universities
Australian public universities have subsequently undergone substantial transformation over a single generation. Gallagher has described this as occurring in two phases; “the first pulling away from traditional academic orientations and the second pushing towards stronger market influences” (Gallagher, September 2000, p. 1) and as a consequence, developing themselves as entrepreneurial public universities. Gallagher argued that the shift to a market orientation initiated a change in the relationship between universities and the state. This is characterised as a move from:
directive to facilitative policies and mechanisms but with a stronger emphasis on accountability for outcomes. There is simultaneously a loosening and a tightening of regulatory measures; a loosening of input and process controls to enable the universities to be more enterprising and a tightening of demands relating to educational standards and cost-effective use of resources as they become so. (p. 49)

Marginson and Considine (2001) describes this transformation of the academic institution as the Enterprise University to characterise the complex interplay between economic and academic dimensions “in which research and scholarship survive but are now subjected to new systems of competition and demonstrable performance. ‘Enterprise’ is as much about generating institutional prestige as about income” (Marginson & Considine, 2001, p. 5).

According to Marginson (2001), the consequences of the enterprise university, underpinned by strong executive control, business and consumption models of decision making, is that:

The bottom line is not teaching, research knowledge, the perpetuation of academic values or the public good created by higher education. In the Enterprise University, the bottom line is the interests of the university – its prestige, its income, its competitiveness – as an end in itself. (p. 63)

Marginson argues that while this self-interest sets the ideal conditions for governments to steer from a distance and thereby downplay a government’s responsibility, it also “locks in...the decline in unit quality, the underproduction of public good, the weakening of global capacity” (2001, p. 61). In this respect the enterprise university has benefits in relation to engaging institutions with their wider community roles, greater efficiencies in their management practices, and the improvement of transparency and accountabilities However, this has come at some cost as a consequence of a reduction in resources, lopsided patterns of incentives, the attraction of research funding and its focus on applied and commercial markets as well as increased demands on academic workloads (Marginson, 2001).

The transformation of Australian public universities as competitive, business entities that are strategically controlled inevitably brings a focus on accountability to external stakeholders. Reid has argued that “it is within the managerialist context that notions of quality assurance have developed” (2009, p. 575). Similarly, Vidovich (2001) stresses that the ideological shift towards the redefinition of education as “a servant of the economy – national economies and the (reified) global economy” (p. 249). In this respect, the commodification of education, in combination with its role in productivity, has positioned quality initiatives as a tool for raising the accountability of universities.

Part 2 – Justification and rationale: quality assurance in Australian universities

Following Labor’s election to government in 2007, Julia Gillard as the Minister for Education and Minister for Social Inclusion, commissioned a broad ranging review of higher education (Bradley, et al., 2008). This was justified by concerns over a loss of Australia’s global competitiveness, attributed to the Coalition’s neglect of the higher education sector and the under-funding of human capital.
Gillard argued that ameliorating problems of participation and completions, and the re-invigoration of Australia’s research capacity, would require systemic change and a new policy direction. The review was to provide evidence to inform the Government’s policy direction. In addition, Gillard (2008) argued that the review would:

build on the collaborative new approach to Government-University relationships embodied in our proposed mission-based compacts...We want to encourage universities to pursue distinctive missions within a public reporting framework of mission-based goals agreed outcomes and performance standards...For the first time in many years, Australian universities will have a Federal government that trusts and respects them. (p. 6)

Thus, the Labor Government’s higher education reforms were directed at new state-institutional arrangements, where internal governance would drive reform and improvement. This consultative and cooperative approach appeared to recognise the importance of university identity and differentiation as an important driver of the change process.

The Bradley review provided 46 recommendations primarily targeted at improving investment, funding to, and regulation of higher education. The report was underpinned by the argument that “the reach, quality and performance of a nation’s higher education system would be key determinants of its economic and social progress” (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. xi).

In addition, the report considered the nexus between teaching and research, determining that this link should be strengthened in light of international opinion. This was despite an acknowledgement that “it is difficult to find compelling research evidence which unequivocally supports the argument that graduates with degrees from such institutions are demonstrably better than those from teaching-only institutions” (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 124).

The Government’s response to the report, was set out in Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (DEEWR, 2009) detailing a shift towards a demand-driven, student centred funding model, the establishment of a higher education regulatory and quality agency, and an injection of funding to cover the indirect costs of research. The latter initiative was targeted at minimising the cross subsidisation of research from teaching and learning funds. The Government identified new funding incentive programs and a performance measurement system. These included the SRE, funding for building collaborative research and the ERA.

While the reforms proposed were directed at establishing student centred higher education, this would also require a renewed focus on quality in both teaching and research. Thus the dominant discourse underpinning the Rudd/Gillard higher education reforms is one of *quality assurance*. As in other countries, concerns with the quality of universities have had a substantial history and the Australian policy context has mirrored international trends. The policy history not only reflects the shifting relations between the Commonwealth and Australia’s universities, but also provides insight into the changing nature of institutional governance and the emergence of performance management...
systems for the higher education sector. In addition, given the somewhat slippery concept of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Vidovich, 2001), the difficulty of its measurement, and its increasing connection to funding and public accountability, the context is set for unique institutional responses.

**Historical background**

The focus on quality has at times played out differently in relation to university reputation, research productivity and student experiences (Brooks, 2005). These alternative and co-occurring points of focus reflect the complex nature of academic work not neatly categorised into a single unit of analysis able to provide a reliable measure of quality. Indeed, Harvey and Green argue that it may be more useful to understand quality as a “philosophical concept” (1993, p. 28) and as such stress the importance of identifying the criteria used by stakeholders to judge quality “when assessments of quality are undertaken” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 28). In light of this the following discussion maps out the evolution of Australian policy on university quality to highlight historical changes and broad points of emphasis.

- **1970s-1980s**

From the 1970s through to the early 1990s Australian universities were encouraged to critically self-monitor their performance (DETYA, 2000) through CTEC. The Evaluations and Investigations Programme provided grants for studies focused on such areas as resource usage, course evaluations and organisational units within tertiary institutions (Mikol, 1996). In this respect, the management of quality remained within the institutional control of universities, suggesting considerable trust in their self-regulation.

In the 1980s an additional focus on “efficiency, effectiveness, and an increased awareness of public accountability” (DETYA, 2000, p. 2) had emerged, accompanying a global trend positioning higher education as a cost to the economy requiring tougher political action (Marginson & Considine, 2001). By 1986, CTEC in their *Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness of Higher Education*, commented that “overall institutions had not developed standard procedures for systematic self-evaluation” (Mikol, 1996, p. 5). This was subsequently followed by discipline reviews in engineering, teacher education in maths and science, accounting, agriculture, computing and information sciences education. The intention of these reviews was to “rationalize institutional activities and encourages closer linkages between curricula content and industrial requirements” (Marshall, 1990, p. 157). However, as argued my Mikol (1996), the reviews were only undertaken in a small number of disciplines as a response, in part, to the reactions from universities and “the unprecedented public comparisons of institutions” (p. 5).

The Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s saw an increased focus on university accountability. The White Paper, *Higher Education: a policy statement* (Dawkins, 1988), mentioned the “quality objective” (p. 9) of Labor’s reform agenda as one that would be serviced through the linking of funding to the development of the educational profiles. Here the allocation of funds was “based on agreed priorities for institutional activity and performance against those priorities, rather than any
arbitrary system of institutional classification” (Dawkins, 1987, p. 28). Educational profiles would define the institutional roles of both the newly formed and older universities and became the main mechanism through which the Government held the higher education sector to account (Vidovich, 2001).

Vidovich (2001) argues that “although quality is not defined, it appeared to read as ‘excellent standards’” (p. 252). In effect, quality defined as excellence took on “a new utilitarian and economic guise, marked by an emphasis on ‘competitiveness’ and ‘centres of excellence’” (Tijssen, 2003, p. 91). More specifically, the model of excellence being applied in 1988 was one of superior quality (Tijssen, 2003), only possible under limited circumstances when institutions excelled in inputs and outputs (Harvey & Green, 1993).

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs argued that the reorganisation of institutions and the accompanying growth in higher education in the 1980s were key drivers of university QA efforts (Vidovich, 2001). Vidovich proposed that quality assurance policies were, in effect, useful mechanisms to “enhance the accountability of universities through ‘steering at a distance’, where central authorities increase control over desired outcomes/ends but deregulate processes/means” (2002, p. 392). In addition, Vidovich characterises this policy phase as moving accountability and quality “to centre stage by 1991” (2001, p. 252). Thus the scene was set for emergence of a new policy context.

Until the new millennium, Australian QA policy has been described as evolving over three distinct phases marking particular focus or declining interest in academic quality (Vidovich, 2001, 2002); The first of these eras occurring between 1991 and 1995, the second extending to the late 1990s and the third developing from 2000. However, Harman’s (2011) work suggests a fourth era from 2003 linked to the influence of global institutional ranking .

- **1991-1995**

Following the 1988 White paper, Peter Baldwin (1991) as Minister for Higher Education and Employment Services in the Hawke/Keating Government, released the policy statement *Higher Education: Quality and diversity in the 1990s*. The paper in part, was targeted specifically at QA arrangements and their link to performance funding. He announced that an annual amount of $70m, additional to normal institutional funding, would be available “to reward institutions that make the best use of their total resources” (Baldwin, 1991, p. 4). In addition the policy statement indicated an awareness of the problems and limitations of quantitative performance indicators. In this respect the Government confined the use of these measures to the institutions themselves. Further, Baldwin stated that:

> The Government has no intention of prescribing performance indicators to be used by institutions, nor will normal operating grants be redistributed on the basis of comparative quantitative indicators. Measures of performance developed for application at the institutional level will be orientated to the
specific mission of each institution, thereby avoiding pressures for uniformity. (1991, p. 4)

However, while the policy statement was unable to provide a definition of quality, Vidovich (2001) argues that at this stage, the policy discourse reiterated the excellent standards model promoted by Dawkins. Accordingly, the Government’s focus was on the reform of the internal management of universities (Vidovich, 2002).

Baldwin (1991) also announced the Government’s intention for the HEC to further explore the characteristics of quality in higher education with the intention of establishing a national quality assurance structure. By 1992 the Commonwealth had established the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) to:

- Provide advice on quality assurance issues, conduct independent audits of institutional quality assurance policies and procedures, and to make recommendations to the Government on the allocation of annual quality-related funds. (DETYA, 2000, p. 2)

Vidovich argues that the HEC set the agenda for the quality debate, establishing “an input-process-outcome (production type) model of quality, with a primary focus on outcomes” (2001, p. 253). Whilst also acknowledging the problem of identifying a meaningful definition of quality, the HEC stated that:

Understanding what the universities seek to do is the first step in understanding its value; knowing how they manage their processes to yield quality outcomes, evaluate their achievements, their performance and what they do with the results, is an important step in deciding whether or not a university achieves its aims – deciding whether or not its achievements are valuable. (1992, p. 6)

Thus the emphasis on quality moved towards attention to the institution’s process and the expected outcomes (Vidovich, 2001). Harvey and Green (1993) and Marginson (1997) refer to this particular conceptualisation of quality as one judged according to the processes that are employed to achieve particular outcomes. Here there is no absolute threshold that must be exceeded to evaluate quality activity. More specifically, this understanding constructs quality as fitness for purpose particularly in its relationship to fulfilling the mission of the institution, that is subsequently guided by a quality assurance process (Harvey & Green, 1993). Quality assurance, according to Harvey and Green, “is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered…The assumption implicit in the development of quality assurance is that if mechanisms exist, quality can be assured” (1993, pp. 19-20).

Between the years 1993 to 1995, the CQHE undertook three rounds of voluntary, whole institution audits. Harman argues that Australia implemented a QA approach, through these audits “that differed
substantially from those set in place at the same time by other OECD countries” (Harman, 2001, p. 168). These audits included the:

- ranking of institutions into bands, based on annual assessments and publications of these rankings;
- publication of detailed individual institutional annual reports; and
- performance funding, with funding coming from a special additional government allocation. (Harman, 2001, p. 168)

In addition, the audits extended the focus on quality assurance processes outlined by HEC (Higher Education Council, 1992), to include quality outcomes (Harman, 2001; Vidovich, 2001), requiring “much more emphasis to be placed on national statistical data collected by DEET and thus providing advantages to major well established universities which tended to score well on most indicators” (Harman, 2001, p. 180). As well, Harman (2001) argues that the Minister responsible for initially implementing the audits, was Kim Beazley, a former academic who was persuaded that international competitiveness would be enabled through the establishment of a small number of world-class universities. Accordingly, the audits and their associated funding would facilitate this.

The audits in combination with the ranking and allocation of funding, had a profound influence on Australian higher education. Marginson (1997) stated that:

> Nothing less than the positional status of every institution were at stake; the process of competitive ranking had a compelling effect, leading to the rapid spread of a reflective culture of continuous improvement. (p. 74)

In addition, Baird (2010) commented that the credibility of the process employed in the audits varied and that it was unlikely that “improved trust relations between universities and the Federal Government” (p. 34) would result. Indeed, Vidovich argues that the differentiation of higher education through institutional ranking was more keenly felt within the sector although the Committee for Quality Assurance “was reluctant to acknowledge it” (Vidovich, 2002, p. 397). More specifically, the audits were argued to threaten institutional autonomy by effectively exerting downward pressure for all institutions to emulate the models set out by the traditional, high performing universities. Vidovich proposes that quality assurance policies during this period:

> can be seen as a mechanism for ‘steering at a distance’, and in particular as a top-down managerial devise for reforming the structure and functioning of both the higher education sector and individual universities, along the lines envisaged by the policy elites. (2002, p. 397)

At the end of this review process, the HEC (1995) produced another report in response to expected reduction in discretionary funding to universities. It recommended continuation of the national QA processes, emphasising the importance: of “outcomes; on quantitative assessments; on external scrutiny; on rhetoric of QI; and on the ‘mainstreaming’ of quality with the general accountability requirements of the annual institutional profiles” (Vidovich, 2001, p. 254). However, before these
recommendations could be implemented, there was a change of government with the election of the Coalition in 1996, heralding a three year ‘quality vacuum’ (Vidovich, 2001) in higher education policy.

- **1996-1999**

The Howard Government abolished the CQAHE in 1996 and responsibility for quality assurance systems was subsequently given to the HEC (Marginson, 1997). Amanda Vanstone as the new Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, announced that the Government would be applying “A new approach to quality...[integrating] quality improvement processes with institutions’ own particular missions and strategic planning” (Vanstone, 1996, p. vii). She also argued that the Commonwealth government would employ a “more strategic, less interventionist role in relation to its advisory structures...and accountability requirements” (1996viii). This new approach reiterated the conceptualisation of quality as excellence in standards (Vidovich, 2001) with Vanstone’s dismissal of the Labor’s approach that “all institutions could be ranked against a common set of criteria” (1996, p. 13).

However, Vidovitch (2002) argues that by 1998, the QA efforts of the higher education sector lost momentum. The HEC was disbanded and *quality* appeared to have been absorbed into quantitative performance indicators (Vidovich, 2002). By 1999 the DETYA (1999) had established annual reporting on the quality of Australian universities as a process of QA that would entail “the development of a national framework which safeguards the integrity of the system and [allows] Australia to market a quality product internationally” (¶7). While DETYA’s report asserted the importance and significance of individual institutional plans, there was particular focus on common ground across institutions in their processes for monitoring and value in consolidating the data provided by universities. DETYA’s report published the QA processes and quality indicators being applied in all universities, as evidence of the efforts being employed across the sector, although Vidovich (2002) argues that this could also have been perceived as demonstrating a lack of rigour and coordination on behalf of the Government.

Vidovich (2001) has characterised this phase in policy as one where:

> quality discourses were taking a harder-nosed edge, and in particular quality was being conflated with quantitative PIs [performance indicators]. There was evidence of some respect for university autonomy in terms of negotiating quality assessments, but there was closer steerage by government, such that universities were subject to more direct one-to-one control by the policy elite. (p. 256)

- **Early 2000s**

In 1999, David Kemp (December 10, 1999), as Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, announced a new era in QA efforts for the higher education sector. The cornerstone of the Government’s approach was to be the AUQA which sought to give international credibility to the
higher education sector. The new agency was established to undertake audits of institutions and to monitor and report on the quality assurance efforts of universities and significantly, monitor and report on the “comparative world standing of the Australian higher education system and the quality assurance framework itself, drawing on data derived from the audit processes” (Kemp, December 10, 1999 ¶40).

Kemp stated that AUQA’s:

main role will be to verify the claims made by institutions. Its audits and reports will be the evidence used to assure students, the community and the outside world that our universities are as good as we know them to be. The key to the model is credibility and that can only be guaranteed if it is quite clear that the agency is not beholden to any particular interest group and cannot be compromised in its role. It is critical to ensure that the quality assurance framework is, and is seen to be, rigorous and independent....The agency should be at arm’s length from government. The agency experts must be allowed to undertake their audits without fear or favour and the agency reports will be made public. (¶31-32).

While this replicated the discourse on QA as a process seen in prior years, Vidovich (2002) argued this marked the point when both the Government and universities recognised the potential of QA as a marketing tool requiring “a highly visible external validation component” (p. 398).

Kemp’s approach with AUQA as an intermediary body (similar to the position held by the prior CQAHE) was to establish the credibility of the new body through the appointment of expert panels, thereby broadening participation in assessment exercises (Vidovich, 2002). Importantly, the focus for AUQA’s audits was on universities’ QA process, rather than on the quality of teaching or the quality of research (Meek & Hayden, 2005).

In relation to funding, if AUQA published an adverse report on individual institutions, universities were at risk of losing Commonwealth financial support (Kemp, 1999). Vidovich (2001) describes this as evidence that the Government was applying a harder-nosed approach to the QA process, commenting that:

Even the language of quality assessments [had] changed from ‘reviews’ (the term deliberately used by CQAHE to create a softer sense of respect for the traditional modus operandi of universities) to ‘audits’, signalling new power relations in the sector. (p. 257)

In addition, Vidovich (2001) argued that despite the ongoing emphasis on institutional process, this was also combined with a stronger push for outcomes and a particular focus on quantification to support the rigour objective.

Similarly, Reid’s (2009) analysis of AUQA highlights two themes. The first, that as an independent institutional auditing body, it prescribed and proscribed university actions at a distance. More specifically, he argues that as a watchdog “AUQA was established not to comment directly on
quality or to impact government policy, but instead to play an independent role in carrying out audits and to produce public reports” (Reid, 2009, p. 578). Second, that the policy shift meant the establishment of a government constructed model of an ideal university, where “quality assurance measures within a university could then be seen as a proxy for its claims of legitimacy as an institution” (Reid, 2009, p. 577).

- **2003 and beyond**

Whilst quality assurance processes for universities generally covered a number of areas, the substantial increase in student numbers that had occurred during the 1990s drove a particular focus on the quality of programs and the teaching and learning role of universities. Accordingly the issue of research quality has typically received less attention in governments’ QA policies. Harman (2011) argues that although Australia has used simple indicators to assess research quality since the 1990s, the impact of global competition and university rankings has shifted government thinking on both quality assurance and research. Here he states that:

> with the growing importance of research activities and outputs in both national innovation systems and various systems of university ranking, much more attention is now being given to research quality, whether or not such assessments are viewed as part of national quality assurance systems. (p. 43)

Harman goes further to argue that the input, output metrics that had been used to link research quality processes to performance based funding, lacked “rigorous assessment of research quality and an inability to generate robust data to meet accountability and international benchmarking needs” (Harman, 2009, p. 153). Consequently, since 2003 the pursuit of an alternative QA model for research has driven the efforts of both the Howard and Rudd/Gillard governments.

This new policy current (Harman, 2011) began in 2001 when the Howard Government presented a five-year strategy directed at improving Australia’s innovative capacity of industry, research sector and education system (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). The strategy involved an injection of $2.9 billion for initiatives designed to promote research and stimulate innovation. The objectives of the initiative were to facilitate excellence in research, reflecting the discourse on quality evident in the late 1980s particularly on its attention to developing Centres of Excellence.

*Backdrop Australia’s ability* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001), was closely aligned to Kemp’s 1999 policy statement on research and research training, *Knowledge and innovation* that had expressed the Government’s concern with Australia’s capacity to meet the “global revolution in knowledge production” (Kemp, 1999, p. iii). Accordingly, Kemp announced changes to research financing that would include an invigoration of the competitive grant system as well as a performance based funding system to allow all universities to compete effectively. By 2004 a review of the 1999 policy reforms stated that while the:

> key principles of Knowledge and Innovation are widely supported…a number of stakeholders consider that there is a need to strengthen drivers for
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excellence (through research quality)….There was substantial comment on the need to assess universities on the quality of their research outputs and the desirability of using such assessments as a tool for allocation. There was discussion about whether Australia should adopt some variant of the United Kingdom’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)\(^{10}\). (DEST, 2004, pp. xi-xiii)

This would suggest that the competitive nature of the grant system pushed ground level support for an increased focus on research quality. Universities had become dissatisfied with the simple metrics used at the time to direct research funding. Harman states that “Influential sections of the science community also urged for more rigorous assessment in the hope that a new quality assessment mechanism could lead to substantial increases in block research funding” (2009, p. 166).

Donovan (2008) argues that the resultant initiative, the **Research Quality Framework** (RQF) was an attempt by the Government to address the concerns of the academic community for quality research with their own objectives of funding research that would have a greater impact value for the nation. In other words, accommodation of an *excellent standards* discourse of university research, within a form of *excellence* where the quality of a university is determined by the consistency of its research output (Harvey & Green, 1993). In addition, these definitions were juxtaposed by the Government’s discourse on quality and its value for money, efficiency and effectiveness with its associated preference for audit, accountability and improvement through competition. Accordingly these alternative, yet co-occurring conceptualisations of quality are reflective of multiple stakeholders (Harvey & Green, 1993) driving the initiative.

Harman argues that the development of the RQF process was closely entwined with the emergence of global university ranking systems. He argues that:

> Global rankings have become new forms of “super” quality assessment that have considerable attraction, with their use of simple numerical scores or leagues tables. They have confirmed the notion of a world university market in which higher education institutions are measured according to their relative standing on a global scale. (Harman, 2009, p. 51)

Significantly, international ranking provides a comparison of university research capacity at the neglect of teaching quality. Here the international standing of a university identified through world ranking exercises “feeds into… [institutions’] capacity to produce globally salient outputs and their generic attractiveness to other HEIs [higher education institutions], to prospective students, and to economic capital” (Marginson & van der Wend, 2007, p. 313).

In this respect, despite the use of performance indicators and benchmarking, the assumptions underlying public interpretation of international ranking is one employing a traditional interpretation of quality, where status and privilege is assigned to an institution regardless of its performance. More

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\(^{10}\) The RAE commenced in 1986.
specifically, there is an assumption that the quantity and quality of an institution’s research is closely connected to the quality of its teaching and learning (Marginson & van der Wend, 2007).

In March 2005 the Government announced that it was establishing a 12 member **Expert Advisory Group** (EAG), chaired by Sir Gareth Roberts\(^\text{11}\), given responsibility for developing the RQF (Nelson, March 29, 2005). Minister Nelson (March 29, 2005) commented that the RQF would:

measure both research excellence and research impact. The framework will provide a more consistent and comprehensive approach to assessing publicly funded research and will provide a sound foundation for future research resource allocation. (¶5)

Here research quality “[described] the measurable influence of academic research on the academic community. [and] Research impact denotes the benefits or returns from research, which flow beyond the academic realm to ‘end users’ of research” (Donovan, 2008, p. 48).

By September of that year, the EAG (2005) had identified a preferred model for the RQF. The process would be panel-based along broad disciplinary lines that would assess both excellence and the wider benefits to Australia (Donovan, 2008). Assessment would be undertaken at the research-group level, utilising evidence portfolios and there would be a graded impact rating scale that would lead to the allocation of block grants (Donovan, 2008). A key objective for the EAG was to provide quality assurance for international benchmarking.

The RQF was due to be implemented in 2009 which meant an extensive timeframe for consultation and development. Harman argues that universities were wary of the possible impacts of this national assessment exercise commenting that:

lack of any decisions on how research block funds would be distributed; complexity and cost; the heavy administrative load that would be placed on university academics and administrators; and the capacity of the 13 Disciplinary Panels to make reliable peer judgements. An important unknown was what consequence the RQF might have on the overall direction of university research, particularly research where impact cannot readily be assessed. (Harman, 2009, p. 169)

With the defeat of the Coalition in the 2007 general election, Labor moved swiftly to abandon the RQF. Senator Carr (Dec 21, 2007) as Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research stated that:

The RQF is poorly designed, administratively expensive and relies on an ‘impact’ measure that is unverifiable and ill-defined...I want to implement a less cumbersome and less costly process that still provides the Australian Government and taxpayers with an efficient and transparent process. A

\(^{11}\) Sir Gareth had recently completed a review of the United Kingdom’s Research Assessment Exercise.
process that ensures valuable research dollars are allocated to the university sector using internationally verifiable measures (¶4, ¶ 9).

Larkins (2011) argues that despite the inadequacies of the RQF initiative and its failure to be realised, it nevertheless had a significant effect in universities. He states that:

> it did provide a stimulus for institutions to evaluate their fields of research excellence, reassess research strengths and priorities relative to national and international benchmarks and to evaluate the impact of outputs beyond peer-reviewed publication and citation. In some institutions research performance was sharply focused on the individual, perhaps for the first time, as acceptable definitions of research-active staff were developed and staff performance profiles more closely scrutinised. (p. 95)

In this regard preparations for the RQF triggered organisational responses directed at the performance of individuals and their research potential to strengthen or weaken university standing.

Carr’s subsequent announcement of ERA as the replacement to RQF described the new initiative as “streamlined, internationally-recognised, research quality assurance processes using metrics or other agreed upon quality measures appropriate to each research discipline” (¶ 5). Accordingly, the new quality assurance process reaffirmed the concept of quality as a definition of value for money (Harvey & Green, 1993), where performance indicators would serve as measures of institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

The following year, the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008) reported that structural reforms in Australia’s regulatory framework for universities was needed if the country was to compete internationally. The report stated that:

> Submissions from across the higher education sector supported the streamlining of current reporting requirements and accreditation processes, with nationally consistent standards and quality assurance applying to all higher education providers. There was considerable support for an independent ‘buffer body’ to carry out these functions...The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit process was generally believed to be valuable and useful to higher education providers in improving their quality assurance processes. However, there was support for greater focus on outcomes measures within Australia’s quality assurance regime. (p. 215)

Here the quality discourse, employing performance indicators, was to be linked to a watchdog body to give consumers (students, governments) some “resource if they are not getting a good deal” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 23).

Accordingly, with the establishment of TEQSA, the focus on standards as a measure of performance will serve as a measure of higher education quality. This marks a substantial cultural shift in the auditing of Australian higher education institutions. David Woodhouse, as the Executive Director of AUQA commented that “in ten years, we have moved from a light-touch system...to a Total Quality Management System” (Woodhouse, 2010, p. 5).
Final reflections

The governance of Australia’s higher education sector, while unique to our domestic conditions, reflects global trends away from a traditional model of largely independent, autonomous, self-governing institutions, to one that is less easily defined, more complex to navigate, and from a policy perspective more difficult to balance. This summary sketches a policy context directed at the steering of Australian universities towards an international standing in research. Ferlie et al. (2008) argue that the steering patterns employed by governments can be connected to three core and co-occurring narratives: the New Public Management, the Network Governance and the Neo-Weberian narratives. The authors argue that such a conceptualisation provides an opportunity for research to move beyond the realm of state-university relationships to consider the state and the academic profession (Ferlie, et al., 2008) and therefore the triad of state-institution-academic relations.

In light of this particular conceptualisation of the higher education sector, it is possible to locate ERA within the New Public Management narrative as an evaluation process and therefore an “[instrument] of steering” (Ferlie, et al., 2008, p. 341). ERA is closely associated with funding incentives and the existence of established and newly created intermediary bodies that also link it to Network Governance and Neo-Weberian narratives. For example ERA data is linked to the building of institutional research capacity through the Collaborative Research Network Program, and accountability is softened through the mission-based compacts, considered by Ferlie et al. (2008) to be indicators of Network Governance in action. Finally, the Neo-Weberian narrative (Ferlie, et al., 2008) is evident both in the Commonwealth’s positioning of ERA as a strategic solution to the challenges of the knowledge economy and as a quality assurance process for the Australian public.

Accordingly, ERA as a performance management system, sits amidst a complex raft of reform narratives that “each tell a policy and management story” (Ferlie, et al., 2008, p. 334). However, the stability of these reforms is in no way secure or guaranteed and may produce perverse effects. ERA does not exist in isolation and will at some point collide awkwardly with other instruments of steering. Recent commentary from the Chief Scientist, Ian Chubb, suggests that the Rudd/Gillard reforms of higher education are creating what Tierney describes as “a perfect storm” (2004, p. vii) in university governance. Concerned with effects of a student centred funding system on the employment of academic staff, he remarked that:

This means as a whole, more, probably much more, than 50 per cent of all government spending on research is seriously influenced by the choices of our 17 – and 18-year-olds. (Lane & Puddy, May 17, 2012)

Universities are therefore facing considerable dilemmas in how they address the nexus between teaching and research, identified in the Bradley Review as the core of a high quality education system, when excellence in teaching may well come at the expense of excellence in research or vice versa.

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12 Such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)
versa. This must occur simultaneously with meeting national priorities and international benchmarks. These dilemmas have increasingly played out in very public forums\(^\text{13}\) as it becomes apparent that institutions are strategically considering the performances of their staff and the way they position themselves in this domestic and international performance environment.

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\(^{13}\) For example proposed cuts in academic staff as The University of Sydney (Matchett, May 08, 2012), the Australian National University (Rowbotham, May 02, 2012)
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