

ERA results: Medical research is Australia's best

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Australia's medical and health sciences are leading the country in research quality, according to the [Excellence in Research for Australia \(ERA\) report](#).

The report, conducted by the Australian Research Council, assessed

universities on the quality of research conducted across individual disciplines.

These [disciplines](#) were given a score between one and five, indicating how they measured up to world standards. A score of one represents research that is "well below" world standard, three is at world standard, and five is "well above" world standard.

Medical and health sciences scored at well above world standard across eight universities.

[Physics](#), [chemistry](#) and history also scored highly, with six universities performing well above world standard.

International competition

Minister for Tertiary Education Chris Evans said the results show Australia is on track to achieve the goal of having ten universities in the world's top 100 by 2025, as set out by the government in the [Asian Century White Paper](#).

But ARC chief Aidan Byrne, who presented the results in Melbourne today, said performance in ERA should not be equated with international [university rankings](#).

"ERA is not a ranking, it's an evaluation of research and research quality across all institutions across all discipline areas," he said.

"There's a lot of detail and nuance that you have to understand [in research] and you make a [mistake](#) if you just elevate that to one number."

"That's unfortunately what world rankings do; institutions criticise that

but they use them anyway because there's nothing else."

But Byrne did say ERA could help universities work out what is holding them back internationally.

"The exercise universities have to do now is to ask, 'OK, where are we strong? Can we reinforce that? And where are we weak?'"

Strengths and weaknesses

Professor Alan Pettigrew from the University of Melbourne's LH Martin Institute said the results were promising for the sector overall.

"From a preliminary view of the data, between 9 and 28 universities have been judged to be at world standard or above in their research outputs encompassed by the 22 fields of research in the ARC's analysis," he said.

"This breadth of discipline strength across a wide range of our institutions, and beyond the Group of Eight, is to be welcomed."

But the results also show gaps in Australia's research profile in some areas such as commerce and technology.

Technology received the lowest score for research quality, and only two universities were considered to be well above world standard in commerce and management.

Pettigrew said this was disappointing for the sector.

"These data also imply that there are many universities that either do not sufficiently participate, or are below world standard in their current research activity, in these same discipline areas."

"Is this an appropriate position or situation for Australia's higher education sector?"

Byrne said technology's low score could be accounted for by universities classifying their research as part of engineering instead.

Meanwhile, he said commerce was dominated by teaching, not research.

"What we're seeing is a discipline that has got a lot of people in it, but a lot of those people are primarily focused on educational activities, which is actually very important."

"If you think about the impact that discipline might have in the broader community, training good accountants and training people in commerce and management at a high level has enormous direct impact into the economy."

"But their research activity may not be the dominant activity that they have."

Past mistakes

The first round of ERA evaluation in 2010 was met with a mixed reaction from the university sector.

The 2010 report was criticised for [undervaluing the humanities](#), and using an approach to journal ranking that encouraged universities to "[game the system](#)".

This time, the journal rankings were abandoned, and the peer review process for rating the humanities was reformed.

Byrne said the approach to the humanities had improved in 2012.

"We've shown that there is quality research in the humanities in Australia," he said. "We've got better at it."

"I'm not going to boast that we're perfect, but we have got a lot better."

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