

University of Sydney feedback on the 2023 Excellence of Research for Australia (ERA 2023) Preprints Consultation

1. Given ERA's focus on evaluating research excellence, is it appropriate to consider inclusion of preprints in ERA noting the issues with the indexation of preprints?

The University of Sydney does not think it is appropriate to consider inclusion of preprints in ERA given the aim of the assessment is to identify excellence in research. All other eligible output types reported for ERA require some form of quality control measure, such as peer review, commercial publisher status or, in the case of Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs), evidence of excellence. The inclusion of preprints, which may or may not have been subject to a quality control measure appropriate to the research output type, as assessable outputs would be contradictory to the aim of the assessment. Including preprints would also significantly increase the workload for universities to prepare their ERA submission for little measurable gain.

2. Is it appropriate to include preprints as an eligible research output type for citation analysis disciplines? Please explain your answer.

The University of Sydney does not consider it appropriate to include preprints as an eligible research output type for citation analysis disciplines. As discussed in the consultation paper, since preprints are generally not indexed by citation providers, they cannot be included in the citation analysis, which is the main indicator of research excellence in the citation disciplines. Inclusion of preprints in citation analysis disciplines would therefore increase the reporting burden on universities for no measurable gain because the actual citations would not be counted in the assessment. It is important to note that preprints are not a different type of research output, but an earlier stage of a research output that may be included in the next ERA round once peer review has taken place.

The consultation paper rightly notes key differences between ERA and National Competitive Grant Programs (NCGP) which are relevant to the issue of preprint eligibility. As the ARC is already aware, the University of Sydney supports the citation of preprints in grant applications in disciplines where the use of preprints is common practice.

3. Is it appropriate to include preprints as an eligible research output type for peer review disciplines?

The University of Sydney does not consider it appropriate to include preprints as an eligible research output type for peer review disciplines. Most of these disciplines do not have a significant preprint culture. Including preprints in the Unit of Evaluation's (UoE) 30% sample for peer review disciplines would present significant challenges as to how the quality of research that has not previously been reviewed by discipline experts should be assessed. It is unlikely that a preprint would be selected as a top 30% output for reporting, because its standing and impact would be difficult to demonstrate. Inclusion of preprints would increase the reporting burden on universities for a marginal gain.

The University of Sydney agrees with the reasons given in the consultation paper for not including preprints as eligible outputs, specifically because defining eligible preprints, sourcing versions of outputs and assessing and comparing preprints by quality is very difficult.

4. What would be the material advantages and/or disadvantages of including preprints in ERA?

There are significant disadvantages involved in including preprints in ERA, for the reasons outlined in the University's responses to the first three consultation questions. In addition to significantly increasing workload for universities to prepare their ERA submissions, including preprints would introduce a greatly increased risk of both incomplete and duplicate reporting. The titles of papers often change slightly between preprint and final publication, making it difficult to automatically detect and remove duplicates.

The challenges for the reporting institutions, the expert panels, and the ARC associated with including preprints in ERA far outweigh the potential gains. Good quality preprint outputs for most peer review UoEs would be included as outputs in later ERA submissions.

ERA is intended to be focused on excellence in research, and including outputs that have not been subjected to rigorous peer review would be contradictory to the aims of the assessment. The potential for the value of the ERA exercise to be diluted in this way, as well as the possibility of further opening the process up to the possibility of 'gaming' would be of concern.

5. What would be the impact upon universities if required to include all preprints in ERA and undertake deduplication to ensure research outputs submitted to ERA are unique?

If preprints were included in the ERA submission, there would be a very significant impact on the resources universities would be required to draw upon to identify, collect and submit preprint materials. The data collection for preprints, including de-duplication, would require changes to systems and reporting processes as well as considerable additional effort from staff, including from researchers to self-report their outputs. Including preprints in the ERA collection would significantly increase the administrative load on universities, and in turn on academic staff. The benefit this additional effort would bring to the ERA evaluation is unclear, for the reasons we have outlined in our previous responses.

6. General comments - Please provide any additional feedback you have on the ERA 2023 preprint consultation documentation.

Consulting the sector on the inclusion of preprints is a valuable exercise given the evolving scientific publishing landscape. Preprints are not currently at the point where their inclusion in ERA 2023 would bring significant benefits to the assessment, but this may well change in the future. A discussion about the inclusion of preprints in future ERA rounds is best started now with a view to potentially making changes to the guidelines for subsequent rounds, should tangible benefits emerge through the consultation process.