Measuring the ‘Quality’ of Educational Research: Reflections on the Australian Experience

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ABSTRACT

In the last ten years in Australia researchers have come under intense scrutiny as assessment measures of research quality have dominated their work. While these initiatives have made highly visible the work of some educational researchers, at the same time, they have made invisible the scholarship and work of many others in education faculties and schools of education. In this paper, I explore some of the tensions and complexities of the educational research context in Australia. I draw on my experience as a researcher, teacher educator and academic manager to examine the discourses that shape educational research in Australia. I provide a profile of educational researchers and how they are positioned in the current research climate, who is funded and what is funded, and what counts as ‘quality’ research. I conclude by suggesting the need for broader and more inclusive categorisations of educational research and educational researchers and better recognition of the diversity of education academics.

INTRODUCTION

In many places in the world, universities are increasingly characterised by intense competition, corporatisation, entrepreneurialism and managerialism. The nature of the work of those employed in the neo-liberal university is shaped by the need to compete for government and industry funding, and to attract and retain students in the form of 'clients' and 'customers' who exercise their right of choice in the marketplace. University league tables, research grant income, student numbers and students' evaluations of teaching, doctoral completions in reduced timescales and publications in particular journals, have increasingly dominated the concerns of academics. 'Performativity', a concept developed by Lyotard (1984) and defined by Ball is:

1 This paper is based on a keynote I delivered at the 2013 Annual Conference of the Scottish Educational Research Association in Glasgow.
a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as a measure of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such, they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgment (2006: 144).

A culture of performativity in academe has given rise to numerous modes and methods of regulation and judgement that enable, and indeed, require academics to 'perform' their value and worth in terms of their research and teaching. In the case of research, in some national contexts, mechanisms for the measurement and assessment of academics' research performance have increasingly influenced how research is valued, what research is valued and how academics prioritise their labour. Research assessment practices have had an enormous impact on academics in all disciplines, but particularly in schools and faculties of education because of the nature of education academics' previous experiences and their connection to practice. This is a point to which I will return.

In this paper, I explore some of the tensions and complexities of the educational research context in Australia. I draw on government reports, literature in the field as well as my experience in Australia as a researcher, teacher educator and academic manager to examine how a culture of audit and evaluation of research has shaped academic work and the nature of educational research in Australia. I do not suggest that the impacts of research audits on education academic staff are peculiar to Australia. There is a significant body of literature about performativity in UK universities, as well established acknowledgment of the significance of research audits to the work of academics in faculties and schools of education (e.g. Munn 2008; Furlong 2013; Holligan et al 2011; Menter et al. 2010). I intend for this paper to add to the existing body of literature. I also expect that some of issues raised in this paper will resonate with academics in Scottish universities.

In what follows, I provide an overview of the mechanisms of the research audit in Australia, including a profile of educational researchers; who counts and what counts as 'quality' in educational research. In order to illustrate the impact of regimes of accountability and performativity on Australian academics, I then present vignettes of data from 2 of my own studies. These 2 separate studies investigated: Australian teacher educators' experiences in academe and their career trajectories (see Mayer, Mitchell, Santoro & White 2011 for details of the study and methodology); and the experiences of Australian professionals turned-academics; their expectations of academe and how they define, resist and take up the multiple and changing roles associated with academic work (see Santoro & Snead 2013 for details). I conclude by suggesting the need for broader and more inclusive categorisations of educational research and educational researchers.
AN OVERVIEW OF 'EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH FOR AUSTRALIA'.

In Australia, the current mechanism for judging and auditing research is known as 'Excellence in Research for Australia' - ERA. It has similarities with the 'Performance Based Research Fund' in New Zealand and the 'Research Excellence Framework' in the UK. There have been ERA audits in 2010 and 2012, with a third planned for 2015\(^2\). The Australian government claims that ERA provides reliable and credible data about the quality of research in the higher education sector. It:

allows research managers and investors to reward excellence in research; assures Australian taxpayers that their investment in research is well spent; facilitates strategic planning to further strengthen our research capabilities; helps promote Australia’s research strengths on the world stage (Australian Research Council 2014)

The ERA audit uses metrics and expert review to assess research outputs for Units of Evaluation (UoE)\(^3\) from individual universities. Each UoE is assessed on the basis of 4 areas: a) research quality; b) research volume and activity; c) research application and d) recognition of research (Australian Government 2012: 5). Impact is not used as a measure of research quality in ERA. The data collected by the Australian government is used for a range of purposes; to judge individual institutions in relation to each other and to assess Australian research excellence in relation to world standards. ERA utilises a five-point rating scale that is generally comparable with research evaluations conducted in other national contexts. A score of 5 for a UoE indicates research performance well above world standard, while a score of 1 indicates performance well below world standard. Of the 38 UoE put forward for Education in the 2012 ERA, the majority were assessed at below world standard (level 2 and below), 17 were assessed at above world standard with 4 UoE achieving a rating of 4. Only 1 UoE achieved a rating of 5 (Australian Government 2012: 321). The high rating universities were those in the Group of Eight (Go8)\(^4\).

Because ERA results are connected to performance-based funding, the stakes are high. Accordingly, there is a huge amount of money invested in its operation at all levels of administration. ERA requires a mass of administrative staff to produce and manage the statistics and graphs used to compare, judge, monitor and record performance. According to Lingard, "... the governance turn associated with neo-liberalism has enhanced the significance of numbers and statistics as technologies of governance..." (2011:359). However, academic

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\(^2\) In this article, I refer to practices and policies of ERA 2012 unless otherwise stated.

\(^3\) Units of Evaluation (UoE) correspond to Fields of Research (FoR) or disciplines (ABS 2012). For example, the Field of Research code for Education is 13, with Sub-disciplines consisting of Education Systems (1301); Curriculum and Pedagogy (1302); Specialist Studies in Education (1303) and Other Education (1399).

\(^4\) Similar to the term 'Russell Group' in the UK, 'Go8' are universities that are well established and prestigious.
time spent on ERA paperwork is a dollar cost that is difficult to gauge, and rarely made explicit or included in the statistics and spreadsheets associated with ERA and its implementation. "Within the rigours and disciplines of performativity we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it" (Ball 2012:19). Although ERA is primarily concerned with the assessment of, and comparison of institutions, the culture of performativity at the institutional level has filtered down to individuals. There has been a huge impact on academic identities and the nature of academic work, with different universities implementing a variety of methods to sift and sort academic staff into research active and research inactive streams. ERA has affected workforce planning, recruitment, promotion and the career trajectories of all academics.

**WHAT COUNTS FOR ERA AND WHO COUNTS FOR ERA?**

Education (FoR13) accounted for approximately 5% of all research outputs and for around 8% of the staff submitted to ERA 2012 (Australian Government 2012: 152). As mentioned above, ERA audits 4 main areas of research work. Indicators of 'Research Quality' 'Research Volume and Activity' include citation analysis, type of research income, type of publication. Research income that can be included in the ERA audit falls into 4 categories; 1) Australian Competitive Grants 2) Other Public Sector Research Income; 3) Industry and Other Research Income; 4) Cooperative Research Centre Income. Education is one of the lowest earners of research funding across all 4 categories (Australian Government 2012: 28). Grants deemed to be of the highest quality are those in Category 1, that is 'Australian Competitive Grants' such as Australian Research Council grants. Category 1 grants are extremely competitive and therefore prestigious. In general, education research receives a minuscule share of Category 1 funding. Of the 22 FoR submitted for the 2012 ERA audit, Education was the third lowest earner of category 1 funding with the sciences and engineering categorised as the top 3 earners (Australian Government 2012: 230-235).
Table 1: Category 1 Research Funding - Top Three Earning FoRs and Lowest Three Earning FoRs.

For the years, 2009-2013, there were 4221 Discovery Grants awarded (the most prestigious of Category 1 Grants). An audit of the Australian Research council statistics (www.arc.gov.au) indicated only 83 were won by educational researchers.

Quality publications are deemed to be those published in high impact peer reviewed refereed journals as well as research books and book chapters, and refereed conference proceedings. Non-traditional research outputs (NTRO) in the form of art, plays, films are also included in the ERA audit. Acceptable journal articles are those on the ERA approved list of journals (Australian Research Council 2012). Approximately 5% of the research outputs submitted to ERA 2012 were from Education (Australian Government 2012: 152). Of the publications output, the majority were refereed journal articles (49%) followed by refereed conference proceedings (28%), book chapters (9%) and books (2%). Only 0.4% of outputs were NTRO (Australian Government 2012: 153). Although education was one of the smallest earners of research funding, it produced more outputs than some other FoRs that receive more research dollars (Australian Government 2012).

Indicators of research application are considered on the basis of research commercialisation income and other applied measures. Education was 15th out of the 22 FoRs audited in 2012 for research commercialisation income. Not surprisingly, there were no other measures such as patents submitted by Education.
Indicators of recognition are a range of esteem measurements that indicate researchers are held in high regard by their peers and the broader community. They include editorship of a prestigious work, membership of a statutory committee, Member of a Learned Academy Recipient of an Australia Council Grant or Fellowship or a Nationally Competitive Research Fellowship. Education was ranked third last in terms of esteem with only Built Environment and Agricultural and Veterinary Science ranking lower (Australian Government 2012: 17-24).

Those academics whose work counts for the ERA audit are drawn from across the academic levels, that is Professors, Associate Professors (Readers), Senior Lecturers, Lecturers and Associate lecturers (often post-doctoral fellows). Large numbers of lecturers and senior lecturers contribute to ERA - in fact, their work contributes 43% of total submitted work (Australian Government 2012: 44). Maybe this is not surprising given they are the largest group of academics. In comparison, the professoriate in education is a relatively small group. Of all disciplines, (with the exception of technology and creative writing), education has the smallest number of contributing professors (9% of contributing staff are professors). They do however, contribute 21% of outputs (Australian Government, 2012: 44) with a small group of professors holding most of the category 1 funding that is awarded to FoR13.

Table 2: Contributors to ERA by academic level.

Australian academics have both teaching and research responsibilities, with the proportion of each, varying between universities, and often, between
academics of different levels. Generally, the more junior the academic, the more teaching they have. Most of those contributing to ERA are teaching/research academics who are at lecturer and senior lecturer level (Australian Government 2012). In general, there are few research-only positions in Australian Education Faculties or Schools of Education, even at Professorial level, (4%) and fewer than other disciplines such as the Natural and Physical Sciences, (38%) Health (26%) Society and Culture (12%) (Cumming, 2010: 9).

There are also significant numbers of researchers contributing to the Education FoR who are not employed within faculties or schools of education and don’t primarily consider themselves to be educational researchers. They might be from a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology. Furthermore, approximately 7% of Education research outputs were co-apportioned to other FoR codes (Australian Government 2012: 152).

**ACADEMICS RENDERED HYPER-VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE BY ERA**

ERA has had an enormous impact on human resource management in Australian universities including recruitment, promotion, and morale and well-being. The sifting and sorting of academic staff that occurs in universities in response to ERA has often constructed assessable researchers as the ‘real’ researchers and the others, as invisible. Those academics who produce the outputs valued by ERA are highly valued and highly sought. Institutions with rankings of 4 and 5 for particular UoE, attract significant numbers of high calibre students, both domestic and international, thereby gaining a sizeable share of the education market and accompanying funding⁵. These universities have little difficulty attracting and retaining big contributors to ERA because they have both, healthy budgets and reputations. The staff they most wish to attract "have become circulating elites, the cash-rich universities offering lucrative salaries and other attractive deals to buy in the ‘big names’ to enhance their institutional research profiles" (Holligan et al. 2011: 716). Increasingly, Australian universities are being sorted into a 2 tier system similar to the "‘binary divide’ between the ‘research-rich’ and the ‘research-poor’ institutions" that exists in the UK (Holligan et al. 2011: 716).

Institutions with UoE ranked at level 3 (world standard) are to some degree, sitting in a precarious place; they are desperate to maintain their ranking — a slip of just 1 point would bring them down to below world standard. Those ranked at level 2 know they have to invest a lot of time, work and money to get to world standard. For different reasons, universities in each of these categories can be ‘pressure cookers’ with academic staff expected to publish more articles, win more grants and graduate more students than the year before. Maybe it is only those ranked at level 1 that do not have the same imperative to aim for 'world standard' and above, because to do so, would simply be unrealistic. However,

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⁵ MyUniversity It is a website established and maintained by the Australian Government. Among other things, it aims to provide information to potential doctoral students to assist them make decisions about which university is best suited to their needs (www.myuniversity.gov.au). It contains ERA 2012 results for each Australian university in each of the FoR.
as a result of scoring 1, these institutions are likely to have to contend with serious threats to their viability and future.

Not all academics who contribute to ERA are academic 'celebrities', or even professors. As mentioned earlier, most are lecturers whose career advancement depends on their work being counted in ERA. These academics often have high teaching loads, and sometimes, high administrative loads. Sabbaticals and study leave allowing them to concentrate on research, are rare. Many of the academics I interviewed for the 2 studies mentioned earlier, felt overwhelmed by the volume of work, as well as the nature of work in the academy. The pressure to keep applying for scarce research income and to publish regularly in high status journals was described by one academic as "unending". Being a 'real' academic (Santoro & Snead 2013), an 'authentic academic' (Archer 2008) was often a tenuous position, susceptible to change from year to the next and dependant on achieving success in a competitive grants and publishing climate. One of my research participants said she was "constantly flying by the seat of my pants. And always on the lookout for the next opportunity to publish or apply for money".

According to Archer:

‘succesful', authentic academic identities are rendered insecure, temporary and risky within regimes of performativity – the capacity to be seen as an authentic, successful academic is tightly constrained and dependent upon the extent to which the academic can keep delivering (producing the 'right' goods) as a neoliberal subject (2008: 392).

For some academics, achieving the outputs valued by ERA, may be a way of gaining legitimacy in the academy and progressing their careers. However, they have to compete with their colleagues, both within and beyond their own institutions, and to relentlessly promote themselves and their work. Ball suggests, performativity means "There are new sets of skills to be acquired here – skills of presentation and of inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves". (Ball 2012: 19). Such competition and focus on the individual, works to destroy collegiality and collaboration (Saltmarsh et al. 2011; Holligan et al. 2011), and can, as one of my interviewees, suggested, even foster suspicion between colleagues. Jill6, an Associate Professor, says, "It’s so competitive now. You get a good idea for a grant or a paper and you have to be so careful who you tell about it".

ERA researchers, small in number, often perceive themselves to be bearing the responsibility for the research future of their schools and faculties. This is particularly so in universities where there is a large number of research inactive staff and/or casual staff who don't count for ERA. ERA researchers can be resentful of the highly competitive environments in which they work and can see their colleagues who do not contribute to ERA as "not pulling their weight", as one interviewee claimed.

ERA researchers are often caught in a cycle of what Morley calls 'coercive productivity' (2003: 25), forced to 'churn' out research but not necessarily

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6 All names are pseudonyms
convinced of the value of what they are doing. Sandra who is a senior lecturer, well published and on her way to promotion to Associate Professor says:

There’s great pressure to constantly research as you’d know and to get grants and to publish and I do a lot of that. I’m just writing something at the moment I’m not sure that it’s of any value to anyone really but I’ve got this data, I’ve got to pump something out, I’ve banged out 7,000 words. Would the world be better off or worse off if it didn’t appear? […] Will I die wishing I’d written another journal article? I don’t think so.

The highly competitive funding environment shapes what research is deemed to be of value. Holligan et al., speaking from a UK perspective, claim research assessment exercises pressure academics "to adopt a pragmatic approach to research, determined by the external funding criteria rather than what might be regarded as worthwhile, such as major long-term projects that are more likely to result in paradigmatic shifts in research thinking" (2011: 716). A scan of the major funding bodies research sites, such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) or the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) indicates that of the small amount of funding that does go to education projects and is counted for ERA, very little longitudinal and ethnographic research is funded.

While statistics about who contributes to ERA are easily obtained, it is difficult to ascertain exact numbers of how many academics don’t contribute to ERA. This is, in part, because the work function of individuals who do not produce the necessary outputs for assessment in ERA is sometimes manipulated prior to the audit and they are not counted in an institution’s ERA headcount. This is a point to which I will return. However, regardless of what strategies are employed to enhance figures, there are significant numbers of education academics who do not contribute to ERA. Data collected in 2011 about the academic workforce indicate that 31% of Australian education academics are research inactive (DIISR 2011 in Bennett et al. 2013). They will almost certainly not be ERA contributors.

There are a number of reasons why staff do not contribute to ERA. For example, Australian Faculties and Schools of Education, like those in Scotland and England, draw most of their staff from the profession. The vast majority do not have doctoral qualifications when they take up employment in universities. Some regard themselves primarily as practitioners who don’t see the relevance of research to teacher education and resist completing research degrees. Others began their careers when teacher education, similar to the UK, was conducted in colleges where staff were not expected to engage in research. Others are employed on a casual hourly or semester-long basis, primarily to teach. Government statistics indicate that 30% of the Australian academic workforce is employed on this basis (DIISRTE 2012 in Bennett 2013). On the other hand, there are staff who do undertake research, but do not contribute to ERA. For example, significant numbers of education academics complete doctorates on a part-time basis whilst employed fulltime (Cumming 2010), often taking up to 7 years. These staff, are not likely to contribute to ERA because they do not publish or apply for research funding while studying and working fulltime. Other research active staff may not have had their work submitted to the ERA audit because it is not published in ERA-acceptable journals or books and/or it is not
funded by organisations that fit ERA criteria, or sometimes, it is not funded at all. One of my interviewees repeatedly attempted to obtain funding for a study focused on school-based practice. Her frustration was evident when she said:

We've been running some research around school-based practice for 3–4 years now, even though we can't get any funding for it. We're not famous enough to get funding .... really important teacher education research never gets off the ground because it's not done by big names, it's done by us teacher educators....

Maybe there is an argument to be made that if it were good research it would get funded, but as shown earlier in this paper, very little educational research attracts the kinds of funding acceptable for inclusion in ERA. Therefore, it doesn't follow that all the research proposals that fail to secure competitive funds, are poor proposals. Because research funding is difficult to obtain, many educational researchers are forced to undertake research projects without funding. However, unfunded research projects and unfunded researchers simply don't count for ERA.

It does not necessarily follow that research work that is not ERA assessable is of little value. Neither does it mean that those who do not achieve the measures of esteem valued by ERA are not highly respected and effective members of working parties and committees operating at the local and national level. Effective and productive partnerships between members of the profession and members of academe, can have significant impact on schooling practices, both at the local and national level, despite not being countable in ERA as measures of esteem. The reality is that there are few opportunities, or even need, for education academics to sit on the types of committees and gain membership of the sorts of committees valued by ERA.

Academics whose work does not count for ERA feel that ERA has rendered them invisible as researchers and therefore, they are often invisible within the academy more generally. Staff who are not publishing in the 'right' journals and bringing in grant money have limited opportunities for promotion in many universities. My interviewees reported applying for promotion and being unsuccessful because their research did not meet ERA expectations — others saw little point in even applying. Despite the rhetoric in some universities concerning promotion on the basis of teaching, this seems to rarely play out in practice with interviewees claiming that that teaching was not as important as research. Penny suggests, "Some people privilege the research by a factor of five over teaching; […] it's actually not highly valued". Lucy's promotion application to senior lecturer was unsuccessful because she "didn't have enough publications in the right places" even though she had "great student evaluations, had teaching awards, was a member of all the right external committees, all that … the bottom line is it's research that really matters when it comes to promotion". While it is difficult for academics who do not contribute to ERA to gain recognition and promotion within their own universities, neither are they 'marketable' and able to move institutions for promotion. As Archer says "As with many practices which produce hierarchies, it is often those who occupy marginal positions within the dominant economy who are most at risk of being rendered illegitimate" (2008: 390).
While research evaluations in some countries are selective exercises, with universities deciding which of their staff to enter, in Australia, any research-only or teaching/research academic who is employed in an ongoing capacity, must be included in ERA, regardless of whether they have achieved ERA assessable outputs or not (Australian Government 2011). This imperative has put pressure on those involved in the management of academic staff to find solutions to the problem. One solution in some institutions has been to reclassify teaching/research academics who aren't ERA assessable as teaching-only or teaching-professional. This means they aren't included in the ERA headcount and therefore, don't contribute to lowering the overall ranking for the UoE. Sometimes this is intended as a temporary measure (until the ERA period is over), but often it is permanent because these academics gain high teaching and administrative workloads as part of their reclassified roles. In turn, this means the chances of having the time to do the work that counts for ERA becomes even less likely, and the chances of changing their status back to teaching-research also becomes unlikely.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The sifting and sorting of academics that occurs in most Australian universities in response to ERA's intense scrutiny has constructed some academics as more 'valuable' than others. This has had a major impact on morale and well being for those whose are not ERA assessable and it has created particular challenges for university managers and administrators as they struggle to serve ERA and develop ways to value the different contributions to scholarship of a variety of academics. ERA has also contributed to intense and unsustainable workloads for all, but a minority, of academics. As the majority of researchers who contribute to ERA are at lecturer level they are likely to have significant teaching and administrative loads. Even when they are relieved of teaching and/or marking responsibilities to free them for research, generally this is done by casual staff. In most cases, the academic receiving the assistance still has responsibility to ensure the smooth running of the subject, and usually ends up training, inducting and coordinating the casual staff member. As research funding is rare, many contributors to ERA are also most likely conducting small scale unfunded work or poorly funded work. This means they cannot employ research assistants or obtain the forms of support often built into costing for grants. They also depend on unreliable and scarce sources of funding, such as faculty or school budgets to support conference attendance and the dissemination of their work.

Education professors comprises a small number of academics, but as the figures shown earlier in the paper suggest, they contribute a disproportionate number of outputs. While it is not unreasonable to expect that education professors would make a significant contribution to ERA, there are concerns about the sustainability of their contributions over the long term. In general, in Australia, as in the UK (Munn 2008), academics are one of the oldest groups of

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7 It is optional to include Teaching-only staff.
8 These roles vary across universities, but essentially they do not include research time.
professionals in the country. Furthermore, education academics are the oldest amongst all disciplines, with 61.6 % aged over 50 and 6.5 % below the age of 35 (Hugo in Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research 2011). There are simply not enough younger academics entering into faculties and schools of education to replace those due to retire in the next few years (Cumming 2010). The importance of capacity building for those young academics who are in universities is well recognised and there have been a number of schemes and initiatives introduced to develop the skills of early career researchers, these schemes are highly competitive, few in number and target those who are already some way along the way to producing the sorts of research outcomes valued by ERA. Universities need to 'invest' not only in those who are likely to be ERA contributors, but they need to acknowledge, support and value various types of scholarly work.

Boyer urged us almost 25 years ago to reconsider the concept of scholarship and to extend our understandings of scholarly work and what is means to be a scholar (1990). He claimed that the scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching are inextricably connected and need to be considered as a whole. Although his work as been circulating in academic circles for some time and has shaped thinking (e.g. Ramsden & Martin 2006; Healy 2000; Austin & McDaniels 2006), what we increasingly see happening through audits such as ERA, is a fracturing of scholarship into discrete elements, with some elements attracting greater prestige and status than others. We are long past conversations about whether education academics should engage in research or whether we should just get on with the job of educating teachers. Of course, we should all research. However, we need to think differently about what constitutes research and knowledge production, and what constitutes quality research and knowledge production. Educational research doesn't always look the same as other research and it can't always be measured using the same tools. It is a "broad and diverse field, in which different epistemologies, theories, research designs, methodologies, purposes and aspirations to knowledge claims can be found" (Pollard in Munn 2008: 415). The division between ERA researchers and 'the rest' also has the potential to further widen the practice/theory divide that haunts education, particularly teacher education. In general, practice-based research holds less status — those academics with a practice orientation stand on the non-ERA divide and those without, on the other. There is a need to widen participation in educational research - not to limit it, or to constrict it to what is acceptable to audits such as ERA.

Finally, the work of educational research associations such as the Australian Association for Research in Education and SERA and BERA are important for their role in research capacity building and their potential to nurture early career researchers through research training. They are also important for their potential to influence government policy through member lobbying. For those of us working in educational research communities, the importance of making visible, educational research and educational researchers, can't be underestimated.
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