

Response to the Research Excellence Framework

Consultation on the assessment and funding of higher education research post-2008

Introduction

1. The University and College Union (UCU) represents more than 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organizations across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the HEFCE consultation document on the *Research Excellence Framework (REF)*.

2. In 2006 the union conducted a major consultation exercise with our members on the future of research assessment and funding. The results expressed major concerns about replacing a peer review system for assessing research quality with one based on research income metrics.¹ Although the current proposals are a departure from the crude mono-metrics outlined in the 2006 DfES report, we are still concerned about the general thrust of the Research Excellence Framework. Above all, we are sceptical about using bibliometrics as the main method of allocating research funding in the sciences and engineering. And although we agree that the bureaucracy of the RAE is over burdensome, particularly for panel members, there must continue to be a direct peer review element in the assessment process.

3. We also have major reservations about the timetable proposed by the Government and the HEFCE. First, this consultation has been published just as the submissions for RAE 2008 have been submitted. Second, the proposals envisage changes affecting funding from as early as 2010 – which is hardly an example of a reduced burden on institutions and staff. We do not understand the rush to implement a new system. The proposed timetable is far too tight if there is to be a meaningful consultation and time to assess and pilot the use of complex bibliometric indicators.

¹University and College Union (UCU) *The future of research assessment and funding: the voice of the profession*, October 2006, http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/c/m/researchfundingfuture_1.pdf

Consultation question 1a: Do you endorse our proposals for defining the broad group of science-based disciplines, and for dividing this into six main subject groups, in the context of our new approach to assessment and funding?

4. Part of the problem of the RAE was that the panel structure encouraged inter-departmental competition for funds, even amongst cognate disciplines. The broader subject groupings should lessen departmental competition and allow for greater collaboration. Further, there is an attempt to group those subject areas that have similar publishing records and this should make comparisons within the groupings fairer.

5. At the same time, the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of research poses major challenges to institutions in determining whether staff are either science or non-science research active (paragraph 21-22).

Consultation question 1b: Are there issues in relation to specific disciplines within this framework that we should consider?

6. We are concerned that certain science-based disciplines will be disadvantaged by the process of relying on refereed journals located on the Thomson Scientific Web of Science (WoS). Engineering and technology, for example, have traditionally made more use of conference proceedings as a key output mode than is typical in the natural and medical sciences. These types of publications are not recorded in the Web of Science database. As a result, other sources of information will be required for all groups and the engineering/technology grouping in particular.

Consultation question 2a: Do you agree that bibliometric indicators produced on the basis that we propose can provide a robust quality indicator in the context of our framework?

7. It is vital that research funding is assessed independently of research council funds if the dual funding mechanism is to be maintained. The present RAE has already led to an unacceptable concentration of research funding which undermines the very principle of dual support. We were very concerned that the move to a metrics system would replace the HEFCE funding stream with one mainly based on success in obtaining research council grants. Bibliometric-based indicators (i.e. using counts of journal articles and their citations) are a potentially more sophisticated metric than 'input' metrics such as income but there is still a concern that speculative and innovative scientific research will not be rewarded in the REF. Although the quantitative study of science, and particularly bibliometrics, is a well-developed field on research in its own right, very few HE systems have adopted the methodology as the main basis of allocating national research funding.

8. Another key problem with the REF methodology, as with the RAE, is that it is purely a retrospective system of assessment and funding. The disadvantages of this have been

well-rehearsed, particularly the fact that in research past performance is not always a good predictor of future success, and that a bias against the promising young researcher who has not yet had the opportunity to build up a citations record is built into the system. For that reason bibliometric indicators alone cannot provide a robust quality indicator.

9. We would like to see peer review continue to be an integral part of the assessment process for scientific disciplines. During the consultation with members, the preferred option for evaluating research quality, supported by 56.9% of all respondents, was 'subject-based peer review' (the corresponding figure for 'citation indices/bibliometrics' was only 13.7%). We recognise that current peer review systems are not perfect but the process is widely understood and generally respected within the academic world. It is also a relatively cost effective way of making use of existing expertise and of spreading knowledge of research activity among academic colleagues. The position of 'qualified support' for peer review is best summarised by the following response from one of our members:

"The present system has disproportionately favoured some large institutions, and the overall impact of the RAE has been destructive to higher education. I do favour a system of peer review, but the present system is too much tied to cuts in funding, and a system of metrics would have all the disadvantages and none of the advantages of the present imperfect system."

10. The abandonment of the RAE provides an opportunity for a more inclusive approach to research activity. However, we are dismayed that the REF will continue to be based on HEIs selecting particular academic staff for inclusion or non-inclusion in the assessment process. We urge the funding councils to take on board the recommendations of the 2002 Science and Technology select committee report on the RAE:

"Any future research assessment mechanism must be able to give a fair appraisal of the research without tempting universities to continue the divisive and demoralising practice of excluding some academics from the process (paragraph 41)."

Consultation question 2b: Are there particular issues of significance needing to be resolved that we have not highlighted?

11. One of our concerns with the HEFCE's approach is its exclusive reliance on one commercial database (i.e. Thomson's Scientific Web of Science). We believe that this will lead to massive distortion in publication behaviour, with detrimental consequences for innovative forms of publishing. In particular, we would like to know how the REF will accommodate the expansion of open access publications.

Consultation question 3a: What are the key issues that we should consider in developing light touch peer review for the non science-based disciplines?

12. The original consultation exercise highlighted the strong level of resistance to quantitative metrics in the arts, humanities and social sciences. We welcome the fact that the funding councils have resisted the temptation to impose a uniform system of bibliometrics on radically different subject areas. However, it is important that the 'non-scientific disciplines' (including mathematics and statistics) are not treated as the poor relations, i.e. because they are not as amenable to the Government's technocratic approach they should not be disadvantaged in funding terms. The 'light-touch' peer review system also needs to strike a balance between reduced burden on panel members and institutions and a consistent approach to assessing the quality of research outputs. For example, in previous RAEs we have been concerned at the variations between panels in the amount of material that they were prepared to read.

Consultation question 3b: What are the main options for the form and conduct of this review?

13. The review needs to engage properly with the full range of subject associations and practitioners. Further study is required to ascertain if metrics can be applied at all to non science-based disciplines. If not then a peer review system will be required that is broadly similar to the subject based RAE panels. However, there may be an element of 'lighter touch' in such a system as the volume of publications and staff tends to be smaller in non-science disciplines.

Consultation question 4: Is there additional quantitative information that we should use in the assessment and funding framework to capture user value or the quality of applied research, or other key aspects of research excellence? Please be specific in terms of what the information is, what essential element of research it casts light on, how it may be found or collected, and where and how it might be used within the framework.

14. The nature of the academic research process (i.e. the reliance on refereed journals and publications) will tend to mean that 'applied' forms of research and the notion of 'user value' will be downplayed in any research assessment process. Rather than tinkering with the RAE/REF methodology, a better alternative might be to continue to increase the budget for knowledge transfer activities, for example, through the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF).

Consultation question 5: Are our proposals for the role of expert panels workable within the framework? Are there other key issues on which we might take their advice?

15. It makes sense to develop these proposals with the help of expert panels and they should be able to give advice on all aspects, including employment and equality legislation.

16. We would welcome the casting of a wider net for assessment panel members. It is always difficult to balance the need for continuity and change, but we have received convincing evidence that, at least in some disciplines, the composition of panels is perpetuating a rather narrow view of what constitutes admissible research and an unhealthy orthodoxy in relation to prevailing theoretical paradigms and research methods.

Consultation question 6: Are there significant implications for the burden on the sector of implementing our new framework that we have not identified? What more can we do to minimise the burden as we introduce the new arrangements?

17. We are sceptical about the reduction of burden that will result from the REF. The advent of a new scheme so soon after the last exercise places a huge burden on HE administrative staff, particularly in relation to data collection and verification. We recommend that the implementation of the REF be delayed.

Consultation question 7: Do you consider that the proposals in this document are likely to have any negative impact on equal opportunities? What issues will we need to pay particular attention to?

18. We had major concerns about the discriminatory nature of the RAE, which was recognised in the development of RAE 2008. A metrics system based on citations and research grants will negatively affect those who take career breaks and, in particular, women who take maternity leave. They will often be left with no research grants during their leave and on returning will have to start applying for grants to obtain funds. This process could leave female researchers without research funding from either grants or research funding streams for years. However, the normalisation of the citations could be less discriminatory if there is no stipulation for a minimum number of papers required to enter the REF. Bearing in mind the equality legislation that came into force in 2007, we wonder if the Council has carried out equality audits of its research funding plans?

19. The emphasis on citations is likely to have a detrimental impact on 'early career' researchers, who will not have had sufficient time to develop their citation counts. Access to some form of 'seedcorn funding' will be important in enabling new employees to develop their research and publication careers.

Consultation question 8: Do you have any other comments about our proposals, which are not covered by the above questions?

20. As mentioned above, we are concerned by the proposed lack of direction on selection of staff for submission; allowing institutions autonomy in this matter can result in punitive and unfair treatment of staff. The proposals are also silent on how each author's contribution will count. Previously 'research-only' staff could lose out on single authorship due to pressures to have classified staff being included on papers produced by 'research-

only' staff or, even worse, having their names removed from their own research papers. The new system must ensure that this can no longer be the case as it hinders the career prospects for researchers.

21. Even if the dual support system is maintained in the short term, the volatility of research funding will make it increasingly difficult to build up research teams or make any long term research plans. If fully implemented, a system based mainly on metrics could increase the casualisation of the workforce. This will undermine the initiatives on contract research staff brought about by the full implementation of the Fixed-Term Employees Regulations 2002.

22. We believe that the HEFCE should resist pressure from the DIUS to introduce measures designed to support only research which is seen to have an immediate impact on the economy. Such short-termism will damage the quality of research in UK universities.