

RAE to REF:

A Research Council View

(Plus some personal observations)

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First a personal view

What was the aim of the RAE?

Originally to allocate QR on the basis of a broad measure of quality

Has suffered (?) from enormous “Mission Drift”

- Became a method for performance management within universities
- Led to significant improvement in UK academic performance (up to 2001)
- Led to identification of academic excellence at a quite fine level of detail
- Improved UK performance in international academic league tables

What do we/government want from the new REF?

A simple method to allocate QR or a mechanism to identify excellence or to drive change?

RCUK/EPSRC Response to the Consultation

Key Points

The proposals from HEFCE for a new Research Assessment Framework to replace the Research Assessment Exercise are **not acceptable to RCUK in their present form**

- It is **essential** that measures of **impact** relating to **economic benefit**, contribution to **public policy**, **development of practice** in the public and private sectors and **public engagement** are included in the new assessment approach
- RCUK has a **very strong preference** for a system of assessment that is **more uniform** across the research spectrum than that proposed in the consultation. This will need the development of new metrics for some disciplines
- RCUK would want to work with HEFCE to develop revised proposals to **ensure** that the two arms of **Dual Support** operate together to reinforce the aim of this system.

RCUK/EPSRC Response to the Consultation

General Points (1)

If the Funding Council QR is to provide an environment for a healthy and diverse research base within HEIs that supports wider Government objectives, it follows that:

- 1) The allocation mechanism should focus on measures of **output**, with an emphasis on the **impact of that output**.
- 2) Given that the proposal for science-based subject focuses entirely on measures of impact, rather than quality or excellence **we would prefer to include the word 'impact' in the title for the exercise**.
- 3) It is clear from the evidence provided in support of the consultation document that the **citation-based index proposed is an indicator, not a measure, of research quality**.

General Points (2)

RCUK has two broad concerns regarding the overall approach proposed:

1) The narrow assessment of impact.

2) Differing approaches for different subject groups.

General points (3)

RCUK recommends a unified approach across all disciplines that:

- 1) Draws on a full range of discipline specific output metrics** that measure research impact across a range of dimensions including academic impact, user-relevance and societal benefit;
- 2) Uses 'light-touch' peer review** to evaluate those aspects of research impact that cannot be captured using qualitative metrics, and;
- 3) Uses expert opinion** to select and weight metrics on a discipline-by-discipline basis.

General Points (4)

RCUK welcomes the pilot exercise. However:

1) It is important that the pilot compares a range of options for future assessment approaches, and also includes some sensitivity analysis.

2) We recommend that HEFCE reconsiders the timetable for the launch of the new assessment system to allow time for full consideration.

Comparison of Responses to the Consultation

Have reviewed responses from:

EPC; UUK; HEPI; TSB; Russell Group; IoP; CMS; RIN; Wellcome Trust; UKCRC; RSChem; RS

Wide degree of unanimity in the responses, especially:

- Agreement that bibliometrics alone are inadequate and in the need to retain some elements of peer review
- Timetable for implementation too fast especially if piloting is to really test new proposals
- Concern over use of WoS/ISI database alone and the burden of validating data

Less unanimity/comment on proposed STEM/non-STEM split

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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?

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

- The groupings are an aggregation of current units of assessment, with some alignment to HESA cost centre codes.
- How will subjects that span the group boundaries within STEM be treated.
- How will subjects that span the boundary between STEM and other subjects be treated
- Broad groupings will prevent specific areas of excellence being identified.

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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?

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

- Bibliometric indicators for science-based subjects are supported by expert opinion, **but** we also note that the same expert opinion advocates a mixture of peer review and bibliometric analysis:
- The fitness for purpose of bibliometric indicators is strongly dependent on details yet to be resolved
- Most bibliometric measures are even more “historical” than current RAE methods
- We are not clear on the justification for continued selection of staff.
- Metrics will lead to unintended consequences. Two specific aspects worth noting:
 - 1) *Impact on transformative (‘high risk/high reward’) research.*
 - 2) *Impact on strategic and vulnerable subjects.*

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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

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

- Current bibliometric data are not a sufficiently robust indicator of research impact here and journal ranking is not an appropriate tool for assessing impact in these subjects.
- Three key issues at this stage. The revised assessment approach must:
 - 1) Assess the quality of all research outputs including books, the full range of journal articles, non-text outputs and publications aimed primarily at non-academic audiences;
 - 2) Give full weight to interdisciplinary collaborations (including collaborations between non science-based and science subjects) which often constitutes the cutting-edge of research;
 - 3) Assess and reward appropriately research that has impact outside of academia, include contributions to more effective policy and practice as well as impact on the business sector..

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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.

- Methodology must take into account and reward all aspects of research impact.
- This requires output metrics that measure excellence in the following areas:
 - 1) Economic and business impact
 - 2) Wider user value and societal benefit, including contribution to public policy making
 - 3) Public engagement and cultural benefits
- HEFCE should consider the relationship between QR and HEIF.
- The potential for weighting of research income streams should be explored as part of the proposed pilot study.

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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?

- Expertise will be required to advise on the relative weight given to different indicators.
- A uniform panel-based assessment system that draws on metrics as appropriate on a discipline basis would provide a more effective assessment system than the 'twin track' approach proposed for STEM and non-STEM subjects.

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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?

- It is difficult to estimate the total administrative burden on HEIs until further detail is available
- HEIs will want/be required to validate bibliometric data which will have a strong bearing on the overall burden.
- An analysis of potential burdens associated with different assessment models should be carried out as part of the pilot exercise.

RCUK response to Specific Questions

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?

- RCUK considers that the proposals presented are unlikely to result in additional issues for equal opportunities relative to the present Research Assessment Exercise. However, because HEIs will continue to select staff for assessment, many of the current issues will continue to apply. RCUK recommends that publications from all HEI staff should be assessed and this would address many equal opportunities issues.
- Staff not submitted should not be eligible to hold RC grants or supervise PhD students.
- There is also the potential for a system based heavily on citation impact to favour older, more established researchers. RCUK recommend that this issue is investigated as part of the pilot study.

Conclusion.

(Personal comments now)

- The responses to the consultation document are not surprising
- The government, HEFCE, Research Councils and the Universities need to agree (?) or be explicit about what they believe is the purpose of the RAE/REF

Possible options (among many)

- Is it to merely allocate a lump sum of QR on the basis of some broad assessment of academic quality?
- Is it to allocate a lump sum of QR on the basis of a new assessment of “impact” and to drive cultural change to give greater emphasis to these measures?
- Is it to identify and reward specific academic excellence?
- ETC, ETC