

Universities UK's key principles on the future of research funding and assessment

UUK fully support the need for a fundamental reform of the RAE process. We do, however, feel that there is a need to broaden the scope of the debate that has been initiated by the DfES consultation published in June 2006. We have therefore developed a set of 'key principles' on research assessment and funding, which we strongly believe should shape and direct further policy discussion and developments in this area. These principles will inform a fuller, more detailed, response to the consultation questions, which UUK will submit before the 13 October deadline.

Dual Support

Any new system should be consistent with the government's commitment to continuation of the Dual Support System. UUK agree with the government that dual support is an effective mechanism to sustain research excellence. A mechanism that directly relates all Funding Council research support to the income earned through grants and contracts can no longer be regarded as dual support. It would also be likely to undermine moves towards recovering full economic costs from grants and contracts, as funders could argue the associated QR is part of the total support package.

QR

Any new mechanism driving QR allocations should be appropriate to the uses that QR is put within a dual system. Whilst the consultation recognises the unique role QR has, this does not appear to have been a central consideration in the design of the proposed system outlined in the consultation. Specifically any new system should support the continuation of the unhypothecated nature of QR, which would be consistent with the block grant principle and the effective operation of the dual support system.

Quality assessment and peer involvement

Funding allocations should be selective and based on a judgement of quality, with peer involvement. The current process has two different but related components, internationally benchmarked quality assessment, which then informs the allocation of funds. The current proposals only deal with the second of these. Some form of quality measurement needs to continue and should not be separated from the funding allocation method.

Metrics will have a key role to play in any new mechanism, as they do in the current system, and their use can be further enhanced to bring about significant benefits. However, most of the metrics suggested to date are proxy indicators of quality, rather than measures of quality. Therefore, expert assessment must continue within the process, for example overseeing the validity and selection of the metrics, interpreting and, where necessary, moderating their outcomes. If there is no peer involvement it will be difficult to get any mechanism accepted by the academic community. Indeed, in the absence of any formal expert assessment the academic peer community will make its own informal judgements and where there are clear disagreements the metrics-only conclusions would be seriously discredited. Noting that many metrics are UK-centred (such as external income earnings) peer involvement is also

needed to ensure that robust internationally benchmarked quality indicators are available for the full range of external customers. We should emphasise that expert assessment would not mean replicating the current full peer review based system, with its myriad of panels. However, as is recognised in the *Next Steps* document, this may involve some high-level light touch structure to verify and moderate outcomes. These considerations indicate a holistic approach to assessment in which metrics play a key role, but where they are not relied on exclusively.

Universality

Any new system should continue to be UK wide and provide universal coverage across discipline areas. It will be important to have a review mechanism that provides robust quality measures, which each of the devolved Funding Councils can subsequently use to allocate funds on the basis of their own policies. This will also ensure that a single, UK wide, system is available for international benchmarking and to promote the capability and reputation of the UK research base.

Equally, all subject areas and institutions must be incorporated within the same assessment framework (though there may be differences of detail in subject areas as there are in the current system). Different systems that produce different quality measures for some discipline areas, or specific types of institution, could prove divisive and difficult to operate. It would be difficult to draw any meaningful line to separate different systems, it could create barriers for collaboration, and would have a negative impact on multi and inter-disciplinary research. It could lead to an ossification of the system if different parts of the research base become 'compartmentalised'. Any system has to provide scope for change and evolution of the research base.

Applied and user focused research

An appropriate and effective mechanism is needed within any new system to ensure that applied and user focused research is recognised and supported. There is a need for a more explicit recognition of this type of activity. Metrics in this area will need to be robust and indicators of quality, as well as quantity, will need to be included. There will be challenges in developing robust output and impact measures, but it will be important to work with the community to understand how these can be incorporated into the system. Expert involvement should not be limited to the academic community and any new system should have a more robust role for the user and business communities than is currently the case. Whilst government have a laudable intention of promoting this type of research the current proposals deploy a very crude mechanism, which will not allow for this activity to be effectively recognised and supported in any meaningful or consistent way.

Behavioural impact

Any new assessment system should seek to limit the deleterious impact on institutional behaviour. Systems that measure, and reward, performance or quality will affect behaviour, this is the purpose. It will, however, be important when designing a new system to be aware of and minimise negative distortions. Specifically, any new system should:

- ***seek to limit the incentives for institutions to simply ‘chase money’.*** If this is not achieved then it could lead to an increase in volume and undo much of the good work in recent years to create a more sustainable research base. UUK are not convinced that any of the models put forward in the consultation would address this in any significant way, indeed there is a serious concern that it would be worse than under the current system;
- ***seek to limit the incentives which have the potential to distort human resource and recruitment practices. Specifically, it should not hamper the development of the next generation of researchers.*** In recent years significant steps have been made to make research careers more attractive and sustainable, and it will be important that we do not take a retrograde step. A solely input based metrics system would work against the appointment and progression of less established early stage researchers. Similarly, much work has been undertaken in recent years to address equal opportunities concerns and this should continue, and underpin any new system. Any new system should also seek to reduce the incentive that creates an academic ‘transfer market’. There is the potential that each of the 5 models in the government consultation would create an unsustainable transfer market for those academics with a particularly successful track record of winning grants. It is likely that such a system would also put significant pressures on individuals.

Transition and financial stability

The transition to a new system should be managed and moderated to avoid any destabilising effects. Any new system should also provide a sufficiently stable financial framework that allows institutions to invest and plan on the basis of some reasonable assumptions about future levels of income. UUK believe that the outcomes of RAE2008 should be the primary quality mechanism informing funding for at least a 3-4 year period. This will ensure that there is relative stability in the system, and that confidence in the coming exercise is maintained. Using RAE2008 as the prime driver for funding for this period will also provide sufficient time to develop a robust alternative. UUK recognise that a new system that attempts to address the criticisms of the RAE, particularly in relation to applied and user focused research, is likely to produce different outcomes. Therefore, once a new system is agreed, is fit for purpose, and has the confidence of the academic community it is vital that its introduction is managed and moderated to avoid any destabilising effects. The sector will need to be consulted fully on how this transition process is taken forward.

Cost and simplicity

Any new system should seek to reduce the administrative burden on HEIs and the effort involved in transforming the system will need to be proportionate to the gains. Although not the only driver for reform, UUK very much welcome the government’s efforts to reduce the burden of research assessment. Before progressing it will be vital to undertake a thorough assessment of the likely impact of any new model. Such an assessment would need to take into account aspects of research management in HEIs, currently associated with the RAE but which would, in its absence, need to be continued for internal purposes.



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Policy fit

There needs to be a more thorough understanding of how the government proposals for reform align with, and impact upon, other policy initiatives and objectives. UUK has some concern that debates around reform of research assessment and funding are taking place within a 'policy vacuum'. Other areas where the implications need to be understood are the development and implementation of full economic costing and the Higher Education Innovation Fund (and equivalent knowledge transfer funding streams under the devolved administrations).

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