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Assessing Research

The Researchers' View

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Prepared for the
Higher Education Funding Council for England

RAND Europe

The research described in this report was prepared for the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This Executive Summary presents the key findings from a series of nine facilitated workshops with academics and research managers, which examined how research in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could be assessed.

Every five years the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) evaluates the quality of research in UK HEIs. The RAE results are used to allocate resources in a way that rewards excellence. After the most recent exercise in 2001 (RAE2001) the UK Higher Education Funding Bodies were unable to provide the estimates £170m of extra funding required to reward the increase in research excellence revealed by the exercise. This led the funding bodies to start a review of the system used for research assessment, of which this report forms a part.

The full report, 'Assessing Research: The Researchers' View', is split into two volumes and can be obtained from the websites of both The Higher Education Funding Council for England (www.hefce.ac.uk) and RAND Europe (www.randeurope.org).

Methodology

Facilitated workshops were used to stimulate broad and innovative thinking about research assessment, while at the same time providing a structure that would allow comparison between workshop groups. As with all qualitative research methodologies the facilitated workshop provides a method of gaining an insight into attitudes and opinions; however, this insight is – by its very nature – not necessarily representative of the population sampled in a statistical sense. It is also possible, that even the relatively flexible structure used may have constrained the views participants were able to express.

HEIs were approached by regional representatives of the UK Higher Education Funding Bodies, and asked to nominate participants for the workshops. The workshops were attended by 142 participants. These participants represented 60 out of the 172 higher education institutions, and 42 of the 68 subject based Units of Assessment, submitted in RAE2001. Around a quarter of the participants were administrative research managers. Possibly due to the recruiting methodology senior academics were over represented among the participants, relative to the more junior staff.

The workshop was structured around a number of tasks, with the views of participants collected as participant produced flip chart sheets used in feedback to the workshop group.

In the first task participants worked in pairs, to consider what characteristics mark out high quality research and what characteristics are important in research assessment

systems. All the characteristics suggested were recorded, and then prioritised by the participants using a system of multi-voting. This prioritised list provided a context for the work in the remainder of the workshop.

In Task 2 small groups of participants were allocated two of the four approaches to research assessment laid out in the Joint UK Funding Bodies 'Invitation to Contribute': Expert Review, Algorithms, Historical Ratings and Self Assessment. The groups were then asked to suggest the strengths or weaknesses of their approaches, and the questions they would want answered if that system were to be implemented. This exercise revealed how the participants thought about each of the approaches, and made them aware of the range of possibilities for research assessment.

In the remaining two tasks shuffled groups of participants were asked to design their ideal research assessment system, basing it on one of the approaches examined in Task 2. The participants were then asked to consider how their system could be implemented, what its weak points might be and how they hoped its use would change research culture in UK higher education.

Analysis

Our analysis sought to draw out recurring themes from across the workshops. For Tasks 1 and 2 this was done by grouping the participants' suggestions into related clusters. For Tasks 3 and 4 the 29 systems participant designed systems were compared to extract common design elements.

Key Findings

Peer Review

The overwhelming majority of the academics and research managers who took part in this study felt that research should be assessed using a system based on peer review by subject-based panels – of the twenty nine systems designed, twenty five were based on Expert Review. The participants also indicated that these panels should be informed by metrics and self-assessment, with some input from the users of research.

Transparency, Stability and Professionalism

There was a very strong desire for a system with clear rules, and transparent procedures, that were established at the outset and not modified during the assessment process. The appointment of panels and the selection of their criteria they used were thought to be critical areas for transparency. Participants in the study considered that the panels themselves should be professionalized and that there should be increased and earlier involvement of international members. They suggested that chair people from outside the subject area with more experience of facilitation should be used, and that these chair people might be paid.

Clarity of Submission

Almost half the groups were unhappy with the flexibility and lack of clarity over which staff should be submitted in the current assessment system, and one third of the groups felt that more staff should be submitted in future. In addition to reducing the scope for 'playing the system' it was felt that submission of more staff would improve the inclusiveness of the process. A few groups included other steps to make the process more inclusive and sensitive, both to researchers and to a lesser extent institutions.

Unit Breadth and Interdisciplinary Research

Almost half of the groups suggested that Units of Assessment should be broadened and reduced in number, with many hoping that this would help the assessment of inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary research. Other mechanisms for improving assessment of interdisciplinary research were suggested including allowing panels to call on - or second - external expertise.

Frequency

Around half of the groups who addressed the issue of frequency recommended that the research assessment cycle should be extended, but in order to retain dynamism some suggested a light touch 'interim' assessment should be added at the halfway time point.

Agreement between Disciplines

The most important characteristics of high quality research were seen as rigour; international recognition; originality; and the idea that the best research sets the agenda for new fields of investigation. There was general agreement the importance of these characteristics by participants from different disciplines and academic roles – although absolute ranking varied.

There was also broad agreement across disciplines about the most important characteristics for a research assessment system; however, researchers from Medicine, Science and Engineering placed a greater importance on peer review, while their colleagues in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences felt subject related flexibility in the assessment system was more important.

Comparability and Flexibility

Participants ranked both comparability of assessments between subjects and methodological sensitivity to the subject being assessed very highly when considering characteristics of research assessment systems. Despite this, when designing research assessment systems almost half the groups suggested that panels should be given more autonomy in developing their criteria and assessment methods.

Acceptance of Burden

Although most participants were keen to avoid a system that was onerous, they appreciated that any system capable of providing the necessary fairness and would be relatively time and labour intensive. Given this realisation, it was felt that the system should provide more useful feedback to the participants to help them improve and develop their research.

Communication

Listening to participant discussions about the current research assessment system, it became clear that whatever new system is adopted, the funding councils will need to put in place programmes to engage the academics in the system's development and explain its final structure and processes.