



VC-NET

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Assessing the quality of research

Questions about how best to assess the quality of research continue to pre-occupy policy makers in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. In VC-Net 30 we reported that the UK was reviewing the way it did this against the background of some concern at the scale of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the administrative burden it was placing on both institutions and the funding bodies. The review report by Sir Gareth Roberts has now been published and is suggesting some major changes to the process, involving three levels of assessment that take into account the scale of research that is undertaken:

- * the 40 or so institutions that receive 2% or less of their income from research would have a “strategic interaction” with their funding council about their research aspirations, which would determine their funding. They could be exempt from the full process.
- * a light touch assessment called the “Research Capacity Assessment” would be available to departments that wished it. This would base funding upon agreed performance indicators for each discipline.
- * the third assessment, renamed the Research Quality Assessment, would follow the old model of the RAE in which panels of peers reviewed the work of each unit or department.

The report has a large number of recommendations for the RCA/RQA process that seek to meet some of the criticisms of the previous model. There will be a larger number of international panel members, the panels will be moderated to ensure that the criteria they adopt are consistent and fair, the RQA process will now be every 6 years (not 5), and a mechanism will be provided for supporting “emerging units” where research capacity is developing.

Whether or not the proposed process will be simpler for either funders or the institutions is a moot point; there are some new hurdles for institutions to jump through (a four part assessment of research competences in year 4 of the cycle and “light touch” mid-term monitoring in year 3) and the number of panels and sub-panels will probably be the same as before. What really matters is how many research units opt for the two simpler models of assessment – but it is a fair guess that most academics will prefer to be judged by their peers rather than by performance indicators or an oral exam with their funders.

In New Zealand the new Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) which was agreed in December 2002 is taking shape. It has chosen to allocate its funding by a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Sixty percent of the funding will be allocated by peer review by 12 panels (containing about 25 percent of overseas members), 25 percent will be based on research degree completions and 15 percent will “reflect” external research income. The process is a swift one; “evidence portfolios” from institutions are finalised in the next three

months and by March 2004 the results are published and the PBRF funding allocations are announced.

Countries are continually watching each other's efforts in this area. In designing the New Zealand system the Tertiary Education Commission studied the old RAE system in the UK. The PBRF model in its early stages was one of those examined by Sir Gareth Robert's consultants, although they suggest that the UK model "has become a benchmark for research evaluation of higher education". Both will now be looked at by Australia in a similar review that has just been launched of research funding in the wider context of research collaboration between universities, research councils and industry. Alternative funding models will be on the agenda.

Sources: HEFCE Publication May 2003/22 *Joint consultation on the review of research assessment*. Available on www.hefce.ac.uk/publications/ New Zealand information available on www.tec.govt.nz/pbrf/prbfintro.html For the Australian review see Press Release from DEST on May 26 2003 at www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/may_03/n358_260503.htm

Merger deadline in South Africa

The post-merger shape of higher education in South Africa (see VC-Net 28) is meant to be agreed by end-June, when the names of the interim boards of combined institutions are to be given to the Ministry of Education. Some reports say that negotiations have come to a standstill in several cases; however, things are working in one case, as the Councils of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the University of the North West have agreed to come together under the name of North West University. Predictably, this is seen by some of the Afrikaans community as a "tragic end to 150 years of proud history" and a threat to the continuation of the Afrikaans language. Others are impressed that one of the more potentially contentious mergers is progressing without trouble.

Meanwhile, in Northern Cape province the Minister of Education launched one of the two new National Institutes of Education that were proposed in his reform package. This Institute aims to widen access and opportunity for the people of the Northern Cape. A timely reminder of one of the motives for these reforms appeared in *Business Day* on 22nd June; the results for the qualifying examinations of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants showed that only 20 percent of black candidates passed (compared with the overall pass rate of 43 percent). This brings the total number of black chartered accountants in the whole of South Africa to 337.

The merger is affecting other parts of the HE sector such as the representative bodies. The South African University Vice Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA), the Committee of Technikon Principals and the Association of Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (ASAHI) are discussing the need to combine into one organisation representing the whole of the public higher education sector.

Sources: www.sauvca.org.za/whats_new/ 23rd and 24th June 2003.

Free access to research materials

The dominance of the traditional academic publisher in scientific journals (and the distorting effect this has had on library budgets) may be due for a radical shake-up. Although this has been predicted for several years, recent developments are making it much more feasible.

The UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has concluded a deal on behalf of all UK higher education with BioMed Central, an online publisher of over 90 refereed medical journals, that will allow researchers open free access to all their content. Until now the business model has been that the researcher has paid the publisher USD 500 in return for which the article is refereed and made available free on the internet. Now academic researchers in biology and medicine will not have to pay the publisher any fees, since JISC

has paid a composite fee for all the UK community and the sum is small enough to be sustainable for the immediate future. For the last twelve years another route to open access to journals has been provided by pre-print archives that present articles freely on the web before they are submitted to the publishers and referees have reviewed them. Such a service was pioneered in 1991 by the Los Alamos pre-print archive for physics, mathematics and computer science (but this is now called arXiv.org) and is hosted by Cornell University.

Another strand in the assault on academic publishers is the US-led Open Archives Initiative (OAI) which is gradually cracking the technical problems of interoperability, which limit easy access between systems and records. Once these issues are resolved, the way is open for materials to be freely exchanged. The JISC is again active with 14 development projects in its FAIR programme (Focus on Access to Institutional Resources) in which institutions are being encouraged to share their internal content, using OAI solutions. The long term hope is that institutions would create internal archives for all their academic information such as theses, reports and teaching materials, as well as preprint copies of journal articles produced by their staff. Both MIT and Cambridge are pioneering this approach and are adopting a common system called Dspace for their digital repositories under which everything in the archive would be freely available.

Sources: JISC Press Release 19 June 2003 and Education Guardian article 17 June 2003 at www.jisc.ac.uk and <http://education.guardian.co.uk/elearning/> Also see <http://arxiv.org/> and www.openarchives.org For the FAIR programme see www.jisc.ac.uk/cfm?name=circular_1_02

The editor, Svava Bjarnason, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.

