



## VC-NET

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### **Councils assessing their own performance – and the institution's**

Improving the quality of university governance is a recurring important theme, which is now on the agenda of the quality assurance agencies. The Australian Universities Quality Agency has a section of its Good Practice Database devoted to governance matters –and this does not just mean academic governance.

A recent inclusion on the Database is a full description of how the Council of the University of Melbourne reviews its own operations each year through a continuous improvement process. This involves each Council member completing a searching questionnaire before having an interview with the chair; after that an annual planning event reviews the Council's performance as a whole. Some of the questions members have to answer are challenging:

- How effective has the University been in communicating its strategy to academic and general staff?
- Does the Council have a sufficient understanding of the University's teaching and learning performance?
- Does the Council adequately monitor and assess the external reputation of the University?
- To what extent does the Council contribute to shaping the culture of the University?
- Does the Council confront the real issues?
- Do Council members get enough exposure to the Deans?

Inevitably questions such as these have to be based on an expectation of what the role of a university Council might be and this will vary between jurisdictions and institutions. However the Melbourne questions set an interesting benchmark for an involved, informed governing body.

A similar degree of involvement and information is anticipated by the authors of a report by the Committee of University Chairmen in the UK on the Monitoring of University Performance and the Use of Key Performance Indicators. The study arose from a feeling among lay governors that, although universities have very different cultures and missions, there must be a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) that are common to all. This is what the report suggests with a definition of two "Super KPIs" and eight others to form "Top Ten High-Level KPIs), which could well be supported by as many as 60 supporting KPIs which are not revealed to the governing body. The Top Ten are:

- Institutional sustainability (meaning "operating today in a way that does not inhibit our ability to do so tomorrow").
- Academic profile and market position.
- The student experience and teaching and learning.
- Research.
- Knowledge transfer and relationships.
- Financial health.
- Estates and infrastructure.

- Staff and human resource development.
- Governance, leadership and management. (covering some of the same topics as in the Melbourne evaluations.)
- Institutional projects (which will vary for each institution).

The report suggests that the management presents the governing body with a simple “traffic light” display of red, orange and green summarising the position on each of the Top Ten KPIs.

Sources: See [http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail\\_print.php?gp\\_id=2384](http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail_print.php?gp_id=2384) for the Melbourne example on the AUQA Database. The CUC report can be found at [www.shef.ac.uk/cuc/pubs](http://www.shef.ac.uk/cuc/pubs)

### **The RAE stays for 2008, but after that?**

When Gordon Brown, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced in his 2006 budget that the government would move to a system of allocating research funds to institutions based on metrics, there was consternation in UK academia. Did it mean the end of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) planned for 2008? How could crude metrics ever replace the value-intensive (and labour intensive) system of peer review? Suddenly the RAE had many friends. VC Net 64 pointed out the irony that just when Australia was adopting a research funding system like the RAE, the UK was planning to abandon it. In response to the general dismay the government produced a number of consultation papers on possible models for a future system based on metrics. These highlighted the key differences between the measures that exist for research in the sciences and medicine and those that are available for the humanities and the social sciences.

The government has now announced what it will do. The RAE exercise planned for 2008 will go ahead as before. There will be one common framework for assessing and funding research and academics will still be involved in the assessment part of it. The metrics will be a “broad basket of indicators.” These will cover the following factors:

- Research income from sources other than the funding bodies (since there has been found to be a high correlation between the research-earning capacity of departments and their scores on the peer review exercise).
- The research infrastructure, which means that the absolute numbers of active researchers in particular disciplines will be monitored so as to protect and retain a national capacity to undertake quality work.
- Research quality which will be assessed in different ways: for science, technology, engineering and medicine the traditional bibliometric statistics of publications and citations will be used; and for humanities, mathematics, statistics and social sciences a modified form of qualitative assessment by peers will have to be developed.

There is plenty of work to be done in exploring ways of undertaking peer review of research quality that are less labour intensive than the system of RAE panels.

There are two policy factors driving the change: one is the commitment to reduce the burden of bureaucracy and paperwork imposed on universities by the State, while the other is closer to home - the DfES has committed itself to reduce the administrative costs of bodies such as the funding councils by at least 10% by 2007-08 and by 5% a year in real terms after that. An old style RAE can no longer be afforded.

Sources: The Minister’s letter to HEFCE on the proposed research funding method is at [www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2006/letterAJtoDY.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2006/letterAJtoDY.pdf)

### **Lessons from collaborative North-South research**

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) has just produced a report that should be read by all those planning or reviewing their institution’s internationalisation strategy – particularly if they believe that their institution has a moral obligation to help solve

the problems of the developing world. The report has studied the impact of a selection of collaborative research projects between Canadian institutions and partners in the developing world. The AUCC has a long history of encouraging academic staff to work with CIDA and IDRC in helping to resolve the problems of developing countries. It also strongly believes that a partnership approach to R&D is the best way to do this; a 2005 policy paper by the AUCC said "being internationally competitive means being internationally collaborative".

The report found six impacts from research collaborations of this kind:

- Policy influence, since a joint research collaboration involving a respected Northern partner was often influential in the development of policy in the country concerned.
- Developmental impact, where the topic of the research addresses specific developmental challenges and was able to contribute to their solution.
- Research capacity building, as the joint collaboration should have the effect of strengthening both individual and institutional capacity for further research.
- Research outreach, when the knowledge gained from the work can be shared with a broader national (or international) audience.
- Commercialisation of research that arises when the research results in the creation of new technology that can have commercial spin-offs.
- Impact on the individual researchers in terms of their professional and personal lives, which can lead to the development of long friendships and valuable intercultural exchanges.

The message from the report is that institutions and funders should look favourably on North-South collaborative research because of the wide range of impacts it can have. Some institutions consider it their duty to encourage capacity building work of this kind, but not all realise that the impact and benefits flow in both directions.

Source: "Profiling the impacts of North-South research collaboration for development". AUCC. January 2007. Available on [www.aucc.ca /pdf/english/publications/casestudy\\_web\\_e.pdf](http://www.aucc.ca/pdf/english/publications/casestudy_web_e.pdf)

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](mailto:vcnet@acu.ac.uk) or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.

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