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The quality of research

In VC Net 55 we reported on the reviews of research in Australia and Hong Kong. There have been further recent developments in the two countries.

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in Australia has just released the details of a "Preferred Model" for assessing the quality and impact of research in its proposed system of a Research Quality Framework (RQF). This has been developed by an expert group chaired by Professor Gareth Roberts from England and subject to extensive consultation since March 2005. The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee generally welcomes the report, but has some suggestions for further refinement.

The model adopts the "Frascati definition" of research and proposes that knowledge diffusion and transfer is not included, but could benefit from a separate "Third Stream" of funding – a term used in the United Kingdom. Features of the Preferred Model include:

- Funding will go to universities and publicly funded research agencies on the same basis, but in two different "pools".
- Assessments of research are related to both quality and impact.
- Institutions can select those researchers to be assessed under the RQF and provide "evidence portfolios" for each of them.
- Research groupings will be assessed and may include cross-disciplinary teams.
- 12 assessment panels (with approximately 50% international members) would look at subject groups and develop ways of assessing cross-disciplinary research in that area.
- The RQF would adopt rating scales "which are sensitive to discipline differences". A five point scale is proposed for quality and a three point scale for impact.
- All funding would go to institutions in a block grant for them to determine its internal allocation.

The Preferred Model goes into some detail on the way that ratings of quality and impact might be developed and for devotees of such things there is a useful Appendix listing the ratings and definitions used in the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and in New Zealand's peer esteem and research rankings.

Apart from the two sets of ratings the RQF seems remarkably similar to the UK's Research Assessment Exercise, although a new agency located outside DEST may be needed to administer the scheme. Once the consultation phase is over this year, the model will be refined in 2006 with the aim of introducing the RQF in 2007 and publishing the results in 2008.

Hong Kong is well ahead in a similar process, which is using the four Carnegie classifications of scholarship as the basis for assessing research outputs in an attempt to address what was

a perceived bias in favour of basic research. A full set of Guidance Notes and timetable have just been issued for the 2006 RAE with a view to getting institution's submissions in by March 2006 and having them assessed by the end of the year.

Sources: DEST: Research Quality Framework: The Preferred Model. Expert Advisory Group Report, Sept 2005. available on www.dest.gov.au/resqual/default.html The details of the Hong Kong RAE are in University Grants Committee, Research Assessment Exercise: Guidance Notes. Sept 2005. Available at www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/doc/ugc/publication/prog/rae/rae_2006.pdf

Corruption in our systems

It is a worrying sign of the times when the Boston Center for International Higher Education thinks it is fitting to launch a service dedicated to monitoring corruption in higher education. This follows in the footsteps of Transparency International which has a website (CORIS) devoted to all sectors of education. The Higher Education Corruption Monitor (HECM) has been launched to provide policy makers and managers with resources and evidence on the many forms of corruption and access to information on how it is being tackled in various jurisdictions.

The HECM's definition of "corruption" is very wide and includes activities such as cheating, plagiarism, visa fraud, admissions, testing, examinations, fake or bogus degrees, corrupt promotion and reward systems, and fraud in academic and financial management. Inevitably, the range of countries where examples of corruption are cited is extremely wide, ranging from the USA and the UK to Nigeria, Bangladesh and Russia.

Part of the problem, as a recent Observatory on Borderless Higher Education briefing paper points out, is that possession of a degree certificate brings greatly improved job prospects and income in most countries of the world. Many of the worst examples of degree mills and dubious accreditation agencies are located in the United States, which seems reluctant to impose stronger controls and regulation. Any false certificates and credentials are tradeable throughout the world and many governments and employers lack the necessary resources or information to detect fraudulent items. Transparency International sees this as a very serious problem potentially "if children come to believe that personal effort and merit do not count and that success comes through manipulation, favouritism and bribery, then the very foundations of society are shaken".

It is not always easy to disband or close down doubtful higher education establishments and another paper from the Observatory by George Brown, an Australian, describes that country's efforts as regards three recent cases – Greenwich University, St Clements University and the University of Asia. Although part of the problem in these cases lay in the divide between state and federal jurisdictions and standards (now remedied by national protocols), the general picture is that if providers are registered outside the country where the so-called education is being provided, the scope for legislation is very limited.

Transparency International emphasises the systemic nature of the solutions, particularly in developing countries with significant poverty. It suggests that the root causes such as poor political examples, civil service cultures, values and recruitment methods must be tackled alongside general strategic anti-corruption drives. The OBHE considers that the growth of mass higher education with international IT-enabled providers means that fraud and corruption will "increase in scale, sophistication and significance". It is very likely that the new Boston College service - the HECM - will have a growing readership.

Sources: HECM is at www.bc.edu/br_org/avp/soe/cihe/hecm/ CORIS (Corruption in the Education Sector) is at www.corisweb.org/article/archive/334/ The two OBHE publications are: "Fraudulent, sub-standard, ambiguous – the alternative borderless education" Briefing Note no 24, July 2005; and "Three controversial virtual universities: lessons from the Australian experience", Report, August 2005. www.obhe.ac.uk

Complex conversations

In VCNet 49 we described the English Higher Education Funding Council's efforts to reduce the burden of accountability on the institutions that it funds. The latest development in this continuing saga – driven to some extent by an entity snappily called the Higher Education Regulation Review Group – is a proposal from HEFCE that it will telescope all its audit-related and performance-related information requests into one “single conversation” in November each year. The consultation paper proposing this idea lists at least eleven different current returns/statements/reports/forecasts etc which will be covered by this rather long “conversation”. The rationale is excellent and is built on the long term hope that those institutions able to show that they are well governed and managed will receive a lighter burden of accountability (and one assumes a shorter conversation).

However the sting in the tail of this proposal relates to institutions in difficulties or thought to be badly managed. HEFCE has devised a strategy for its “engagement” which involves agreeing a “support strategy” to meet the particular circumstances of each case. The consultation paper sets out just what this might mean with levels of intervention ranging from commissioning investigations to requesting the appointment of interim managers to take over areas of institutional management or withdrawing funding.

Source: HEFCE Consultation Paper July 2005/31 “Accountability for Higher Education institutions”. Available at www.hefce.ac.uk under “Publications”.

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.
