



Berkshire House,
252-256 King's Road,
Reading RG1 4HP

Tel: 0118 953 3770

Caroline.bucklow@acss.org.uk
<http://www.acss.org.uk>

DfES document

Reform of higher education research assessment and funding

Response on behalf of the Academy of Social Sciences

The Academy of Social Sciences is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the DfES' proposals on the reform of higher education research assessment and funding. The Academy is composed of 348 Academicians and 30 Learned Societies. Academicians are distinguished scholars and practitioners from academia and the public and private sectors. Most of the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences in the United Kingdom are represented within the Academy. The Academy's mission, in partnership with its member Learned Societies, is the advancement within the United Kingdom of the social sciences in understanding today and shaping tomorrow. The Academy responds to Government and other consultations on behalf of the social science community, organises meetings about the social sciences for practitioners and seminars on topics that span the disciplines in the social sciences, and sponsors some schemes that promote social science and enhance its value to society.

The Academy of Social Sciences has held several meetings in preparation for this response to elicit views from a very broad range of the social science

disciplines. From these meetings it has become clear that, for many disciplines, a purely metrics based approach would be unacceptable, while a carefully selected combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess research quality would gain a good measure of support. The main difficulty lies, however, in identifying those quantitative measures which are relevant to the quality (rather than quantity) of research, are selected to avoid bias towards particular styles of research, and reflect the diversity of disciplines and research environments encompassed by the social sciences. This problem affects the social sciences more than either STEM subjects or Arts & Humanities, because much work in social sciences crosses disciplinary boundaries. Measures designed to recognise quality within disciplines are poorly adapted to recognising excellence in cross- or inter-disciplinary research. There is real concern that failure to address this issue within a metrics based assessment system could reduce the contribution of social science research to many important fields such as the medical and biosciences.

There is anxiety that traditional metrics-based approaches rely heavily on bibliometric data which do not fully capture the range of research activity within the social sciences. For example, traditional bibliometric data relates overwhelmingly to refereed journal articles, which tend to favour established disciplines rather than new and interdisciplinary approaches, while much high quality research in the social sciences is published in books rather than articles which are under-represented in bibliometric data. Moreover, bibliometric data are rarely able to recognise new and innovative contributions from researchers at an early stage in their career.

There is similar concern that the use of research funding as a metric will tend to privilege empirical studies over less expensive theoretical work and large scale projects suited to some social science disciplines over small scale projects prevalent in others.

Many of those whom we have consulted believe it is essential to the future of the social sciences to ensure that there is a spread of universities across the UK that are able to conduct good quality research, often for local needs, rather than have concentration in just a few centres of excellence. The Academy of Social Sciences takes the view that a much more focussed debate is required on how to achieve a measure of agreement about how a robust, reliable and relevant set of metrics might be collected, without increasing the burden of evidence gathering on the universities. We would welcome the opportunity to facilitate further debate and, if appropriate, co-ordinate evaluation of proposed approaches. To this end we have already proposed a meeting bringing together leading social scientists with officials within the DfES, to explore the issues in more detail.

Responses to questions posed in the consultation document

1 Which, if any, of the RAE 2008 panels might adopt a greater or wholly metrics-based approach?

Comments:

From a Social Science perspective:

Evidence from studies many of which have been conducted by social scientists suggests that a wholly metrics based system is likely to produce perverse results. Consequently there is no case for any panel even in STEM subjects, but particularly in the social sciences to apply metrics in formulaic or algorithmic way without allowing for professional judgement. Such an approach is likely to increase the danger of unfair or unreliable decisions.

From the point of view of the social sciences which we stress form a part of the academic community within ALL sub-panel areas, none of the sub-panels should change their approach at this late stage. All the RAE2008 panels propose to use metrics in some measure. All have consulted their subject communities and have arrived at a widely accepted consensus that their proposed use of a range of metric and non-metric indicators are appropriate to the subject area concerned. Any radical change in approach at this stage would be likely to threaten the trust of the academic community in the RAE and should be avoided.

2 Have we identified all the important metrics? Bearing in mind the need to avoid increasing the overall burden of data collection on institutions, are there other indicators that we should consider?

Comments:

We consider that unless peer review evidence is counted as a metric, all the relevant metrics have been considered but that these metrics are not adequate on their own.

It is important to recognise that the size of the “basket of indicators” may have as much effect on the outcome of evaluation as the choice of the specific indicators. Use of input measure(s) alone is inadequate, especially if the number is reduced to only one. On the other hand, too many elements will reduce the salience of the indicators.

It is dangerous to put too much emphasis on input measures just because there is a lack of agreement on reliable output measures. There are concerns over both an over-reliance on citations as a measure of impact and also that correlation between QR funding and research council funding may not be a good indicator of quality.

3 Which of the alternative models described in this chapter do you consider to be the most suitable for STEM subjects? Are there alternative models or refinements of these models that you would want to propose?

Comments:

Some social science work is directly embedded within STEM, in relation to research in areas such as the social implications of ICT or TEL; and medical sociology or medical ethics. In these areas metrics chosen to reflect esteem within STEM are not likely to recognise adequately the measures of value of other disciplines. As a result a metrics system focussed narrowly on measures of esteem appropriate to a single discipline could result in some disciplines losing access to other funds, particularly if high tariff disciplines are discouraged from collaborative working with low tariff disciplines. A key example is work on social care in collaboration with medical research.

4 What, in your view, would be an appropriate and workable basis for assessing and funding research in non-STEM subjects?

Comments:

We are concerned that there is no recognition of the specific perspectives of the social sciences within the consultation document and what works for Arts & Humanities may not apply for the social sciences.

Bibliometric measures are particularly problematic in the social sciences. For example, current citation indices reflect what was important circa 2001. This could militate against rewarding innovation and forward-looking research programmes. Evidence from bibliometric studies by social scientists also throws doubt on the validity of the correlation between citation scores and research quality.

Assessment of research quality should involve peer-assessed judgements of research quality using metrics as significant but not exclusive part of its evidence base.

There is a need for better transparency in the relationship between quality evaluation and funding allocation. It is highly probable that higher levels of aggregation in funding allocation will reduce transparency so that larger or broader panels are likely not to be helpful in improving the quality of judgements.

5 What are the possible undesirable behavioural consequences of the different models and how might the effects be mitigated?

Comments:

First, we need to define what the desirable behavioural consequences are that we wish to promote. We believe that these can best be expressed in terms of desirable properties of the structure of the whole UK research community rather than at the level of single institutions:

1. Diversity – we wish to see a diverse portfolio of research in the UK in which different methodologies and approaches have centres of excellence in different contexts;
2. Multi-disciplinarity – we wish to see multi-disciplinary teams and inter-disciplinary collaborations that bring STEM, the social sciences and Arts & Humanities researchers together to explore problems that lie on the boundaries of current disciplines;
3. Human Capital – the best and brightest school leavers and undergraduates should be attracted to careers in research. This depends on research maintaining a tight coupling to undergraduate and postgraduate teaching as well as outreach to schools and the community;
4. Knowledge Exchange – we recognize that research cannot live in isolation from application to the benefit of the economy and quality of life in the UK and

the world more widely, and so we recognize that a thriving research base must develop strong links to business and the community. We therefore believe that it is essential that the UK's national portfolio remain strong and diverse. Behaviours to be avoided are those that might threaten this diversity, for example, by forcing a single metric to become the only one that mattered in determining an institution's income. All the currently proposed models A-E currently demonstrate this failing. Even the introduction of a broad 'basket' of measures would have the same effect since only certain measurable factors are open to direct institutional strategic management. Mitigation of these effects depends on judgements of the outcomes of research – through expert peer review coupled with expert-based judgments of the broader range of institutional/departmental strategy and input/output/volume metrics.

6 In principle, do you believe that a metrics-based approach for assessment or funding can be used across all institutions?

Comments:

No. An exclusively metric system, particularly if heavily reliant on input metrics, creates problems for smaller institutions and specialist institutions working in new and applied disciplines.

The leading research universities with research strength across the board in all subject areas may be sufficiently comparable to allow metrics to be consistently applied, and for the correlation between QR and research income to be used as a fair proxy. However, for the majority of institutions there is specialization in a smaller number of key areas. This is both sensible and to be encouraged. However, it will lead to these institutions losing out in financial terms and may encourage unforeseen behavioural consequences such as the closing down of inter-disciplinary groups between social science and STEM subjects where these activities are inter-institutional. Particularly at threat may be the new universities which could be big losers under some of the metric based systems and as a result, this could have undesirable regional and political consequences.

7 Should the funding bodies receive and consider institutions' research plans as part of the assessment process?

Comments:

No. It is difficult to see how information in research plans would be evaluated in a transparent and fair way and the proposal is also inconsistent with the overall aim of reducing the costs of evaluation. Unless prepared to great length and in considerable detail, all institutions are likely to present very similar research plans, employing the same kind of general arguments. Little extra substantial evidence about research quality will be learned from these plans, that is not already available from other regularly collected information.

8 How important do you feel it is for there to continue to be an independent assessment of UK higher education research quality for benchmarking purposes? Are there other ways in which this could be accomplished?

Comments:

It is essential that research quality is assessed if one wishes institutional behaviour to favour research quality. To give the UK international comparability with other leading research nations, the process must be well structured, transparent and must maintain the support and trust of its academic community. This may be an expensive process, but ultimately the value of the process of research quality assessment depends on this investment.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge individual responses unless you place an 'X' in the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply x

Here at the Department for Education and Skills we carry out our research on many different topics and consultations. As your views are valuable to us, would it be alright if we were to contact you again from time to time either for research or to send through consultation documents?

xYes No

All UK national public consultations are required to conform to the following standards:

1. Consult widely throughout the process, allowing a minimum of 12 weeks for written consultation at least once during the development of the policy.
2. Be clear about what your proposals are, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the timescale for responses.
3. Ensure that your consultation is clear, concise and widely accessible.
4. Give feedback regarding the responses received and how the consultation process influenced the policy.
5. Monitor your department's effectiveness at consultation, including through the use of a designated consultation co-ordinator.
6. Ensure your consultation follows better regulation best practice, including carrying out a Regulatory Impact Assessment if appropriate.

Further information on the Code of Practice can be accessed through the Cabinet Office Website: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation-guidance/content/introduction/index.asp>

Thank you for taking time to respond to this consultation.

Completed questionnaires and other responses should be sent to the address shown below by 13 October 2006

Send by post to: J Cutshall, 1E, Department for Education & Skills, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT Send by e-mail to: rae.consultation@dfes.gsi.gov.uk