Research assessment in the UK

Lesley Dinsdale
Adviser to the REF2014 Assessment Panels

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Presentation outline

- The UK research, funding and policy context – the role of the Higher Education Funding Councils
- The 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)
- The 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF)
- The effects of research assessment
- Institutional perspectives on the RAE and REF
- The future of the REF
The role of HEFCE

- HEFCE funds and promotes excellent teaching, research and knowledge exchange in English universities

- Single largest funder of research in UK - £1.6bn per year
HEFCE research policy aims

- To promote and support a world class research sector in the UK
  - Sustainably funded and dynamic
- A major contribution to the expansion and dissemination of knowledge and to economic prosperity and national wellbeing
- These aims are pursued by funding selectively on the basis of performance
How research in UK Universities is funded - the ‘dual support’ system

HEFCE block grant research funding: £1.6bn *allocated selectively by formula on the basis of the outcome of RAE2008*

Other external funders supporting specific research projects: *Funding allocated through bids, negotiation of contracts, etc:*

- 7 UK Research Councils: c.£1.8bn
- Charities and other public funders: c£600M
- UK Business: c£600M
- EU: c£400M

UK Govt-Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

Universities
Purposes of research assessment

- To allocate research funding *selectively* on the basis of performance, administering a fund of £1.6bn per year in England
- To encourage and reward excellence
- To provide accountability for public funding and demonstrate the benefits of public investment
- To produce benchmarks and reputational yardsticks, including useful management tools
A brief history: the RAE

  - UK-wide (England, Scotland, Wales, N. Ireland)
  - Based on peer review
  - Carried out by ~70 subject-based panels with membership drawn from
    - senior UK academic staff
    - limited numbers of international academics and ‘users’ of research
A brief history: the RAE

- Assessed the quality of three separate elements:
  - Outputs (up to 4 for each staff member)
  - Environment
  - Esteem (e.g. prizes, fellowships, awards, etc)
- Universities could choose how many staff and which outputs are included
- Results informed the selective distribution of block grant funding
- Exercise has evolved over time – more sophisticated as institutions learned how to ‘play the game’
## RAE 2008: assessment criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitions of starred quality levels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Four star</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Three star</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Two star</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>One star</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unclassified</strong></td>
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RAE 2008: UK average results

(staff-weighted)

Percentage of research activity

4* (world-leading) 3* (internationally excellent) 2* (internationally recognised) 1* (nationally recognised) unclassified (below national standard)

Quality level
RAE 2008: scale of the exercise

- 2,363 submissions were made from c 150 HEIs in 67 subject areas - ‘Units of assessment’ (‘UOAs’)
- 52,409 FTE staff and 215,000 research outputs submitted
- 1,100 panel members; 400 panel meetings
- Total cost of £60 million (£12 million for admin and £48 million for Universities’ preparation)
- Results used to allocate ~£10 billion of funding over the next six years
## RAE 2008: timelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hefce</th>
<th>Universities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development</strong></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Appointed the RAE panels</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Issued guidance to Universities – ‘rules’</td>
<td>Initial ‘mock RAE’ exercises</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Panels finalised their specific assessment criteria</td>
<td>Strategic decisions on which staff and outputs to include</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Universities made submissions Nov 2007</td>
<td>Submission development, more ‘mock RAE’ exercises!</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Panels assessed submissions; outcomes published Dec 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>Funding allocated to HEIs</td>
<td>Consider implications of the outcome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RAE 2008: funding outcomes

- Funding outcomes are highly selective (the top 10 Universities receive 50% of the funding)
- Funding for each University is calculated by multiplying the volume of submitted staff by proportion of work at each star level (in each UOA)
- Funding is weighted heavily to 4*
- Funding for each university is essentially fixed until the next assessment exercise!
- Tension for universities between maximising volume = money and quality = league tables!
Benefits of research assessment

- Over time it has contributed to improvements in institutional research management and performance at national level
- It provides strong accountability and advocacy for public funding to stakeholders
- Provides reputational benchmarks that are recognised nationally and internationally – informs league tables
Common criticisms

- Cost and burdens, particularly for
  - universities in preparation (2 years minimum)
  - assessment panels (10 months)
- High stakes and competition can lead to a degree of ‘gaming’ (e.g., recruiting staff close to the deadline)
- Obsession with league tables!
- Difficulties in accommodating interdisciplinary research (each staff member may only be submitted in one UOA)
From RAE to the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

- A revised framework for assessment developed through extensive national debate:
  - Can costs and burdens be reduced by replacing peer review with metrics (citations and other quantitative indicators)?
  - Is it feasible to assess the broader socio-economic impact of research? – an emerging priority of the UK Govt
  - What other improvements can be made?
Consensus in the UK was that:

- The available metrics are proxies; they don’t measure quality as such
- Metrics could be manipulated and stimulate undesirable behaviours (e.g., citation clubs, changes in publication practices, increased grant applications)
- Metrics are not appropriate in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; and separate systems are not acceptable
- Metrics – used with caution – can inform peer review but not replace it
The REF framework

- Assessment and results in 2014
- It remains a process of expert review, focused mainly on academic excellence, the assessment of outputs and of environment
- Significant changes:
  - Explicit assessment of research ‘impact’ – has replaced the assessment of ‘esteem’
  - Fewer, broader panels operating more consistently across the exercise
  - Use of metrics to inform expert review – Scopus citations used by some UOAs to inform the assessment of research outputs
REF panels and Subjects (UOAs)

- 36 sub-panels working under the guidance of 4 main panels (cf 67 in RAE2008):
  - A: Medicine, biomedical and biological sciences
  - B: Physical sciences and Engineering
  - C: Social Sciences
  - D: Arts and Humanities

- Panels appointed through a nominations process
- Panels mainly comprised of practicing researchers, with increased use of ‘research users’ on each panel
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Architecture, Built Environment and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Geography, Environment Studies and Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Economics and Econometrics</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Business and Management Studies</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Law</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Politics and International Studies</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Social Work and Social Policy</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Anthropology and Development Studies</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Sports-related Studies</td>
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</table>
The REF assessment framework

Overall quality profile

Outputs
Up to 4 outputs per researcher
65%

Impact
Impact case studies and general strategy for impact
20%

Environment
Data and narrative about research strategy, students, staffing, income, facilities and collaborations
15%
**REF results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UOA 9 (Physics)</th>
<th>FTE staff submitted</th>
<th>4*</th>
<th>3*</th>
<th>2*</th>
<th>1*</th>
<th>Unclassified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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</table>

- We will also publish ‘sub-profiles’ for outputs, impact and environment
- Panels will provide brief feedback on each submission, and an overview report of the UOA
Impact and the REF

- By assessing the impact of research we aim to:
  - Demonstrate the benefits of public investment in research
  - Encourage effective dissemination of research outcomes and engagement with business, the public sector, charities and the broader public
Assessing impact in the REF (1)

- Impact is defined broadly: any effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia
- No expectation that all research/researchers have made an impact beyond academia
- Recognition of ‘time-lags’ from research to impact
- There are many ways in which research can lead to impact – no presumed ‘model’ of research-to-impact
Assessing impact (2)

- A case study approach:
  - 1 case study per 10 members of staff submitted
  - Impacts that occurred during 2008-2013, underpinned by research since 1993
  - Underpinning research must meet a quality threshold
- Assessed jointly by academic and ‘user’ panel members
  - Using quantitative and qualitative evidence as appropriate to the case being made
Impact – institutional issues

- Untried, apart from a small-scale pilot exercise
- Evidence of impact claims was difficult to collect from users of the impact
- Presentation and writing of case studies (4 pages only!)
- Very burdensome – has almost doubled the amount of work in preparing submissions
REF – The Future?

- We expect that there will be a ‘REF2020’
- We expect the assessment of impact to continue
  - Hefce are conducting a review of the process in REF2014
- The Government has recently instructed Hefce to consult widely on the possible increased use of metrics in future REFs (citation data, other possible ‘proxies’ for assessment of outputs, environment and impact
Thank you for listening

www.ref.ac.uk
www.hefce.ac.uk