

Research assessment in the UK: Is it worth it?

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Background

- Research Assessment Exercises since 1986, but much longer history
- Basic rationale: accountability, “health” of the system, resource allocation
- UK now preparing for Research Excellence Framework 2014, submissions Nov 2013



Format

- Unit of assessment (UoA): disciplinary groups within university
- Four outputs for each staff member submitted to the exercise
- Panel of peers to assess UoA against criteria: quality, internationality, excellence, robustness, originality, rigour
- Outcome is research profile: distribution of performance across four categories (1* - 4: national – world-wide quality), e.g. 40-20-10-10
- Distribution of resource on basis of profiles: 4* = 9 x unit, 3* = 3 x unit, 1* = 0 ...



Changes over the years

- # units of assessment changed: now 36 for the REF (was more than 70)
- Criteria changed somewhat, but also classifications (now 4 classes, from 7 in 1990s)
- More selectivity in terms of resource allocation: e.g. 1996: 5-rated received 4 x amount of 2-rated UoA)
- More use of bibliometrics?
- Broader perception of output/performance: 65% based on research output, 20% impact, 15% environment (PhD graduates, research income)



A bit more on impact ...

- Case studies per UoA of each university: one + one per each 10 FTE submitted
- Should show “social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia, underpinned by excellent research”
- Impact ≠ dissemination
- Scores: 1 – 4, indicators are “reach” and “significance”
- Criteria to be developed by panels

(REF 01.2011, March 2011)



Impacts on ...

- Universities & UoAs (strategies)
- Individual academics
- Public (confidence)
- Higher education landscape



General problems

- Subjective judgements, black box (Elton, 2000)
- Consistency over time (Sharp, 2004)
- Costs of exercise
- Bureaucratisation of accountability (Wilmott, 2011)
- Matthew effect (those that have ...), equity issues
- How to measure impact? (Olssen, 2011)

Academics

- More emphasis on journal output versus other outputs (books, book chapters)
- Researchers driven towards calculative behaviour? SYWT ...
- Enormous pressures on staff (certainly those on probation)
- Journal rankings play dominant role (e.g. Schools of Management rely heavily on ABS ranking)
- Stifling creativity, conservative research strategies, interdisciplinarity at risk?
- Staff to “tick all the boxes” (output, environment, impact)

Landscape

- Performance: using relative citation impact, UK has improved its international position over the past decades, but is it due to RAEs?
- Selectivity: yes, in 2009 48 (out of ~100) universities received 90% of the funding; no, it was 38 universities in 2008.
- Concentration: yes: bulk of citation impact is located in Golden Triangle, due to the performance of individuals at small number of universities
- But: UK system has always been stratified ...

Is it worth it?

- Surprisingly, not that much clear-cut evidence to decide on this ...

Considerations

- Goodhart's law (paraphrased): as soon as an indicator becomes the target, it loses its significance.
- REF is a high-stake-high-risk exercise solely focusing on research, but with important side-effects (some known, some unknown). Do governments sufficiently think through the consequences?

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