

Australian Academy of Science

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Establishing a Research Quality Framework (RQF) Australian Academy of Science Submission

The Australian Academy of Science thanks the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) for the opportunity to hold In February 2005 the workshop *Establishing a Research Quality Framework*. The Academy agrees that the introduction of an RQF would play a useful role in better allocating discretionary institutional funding within the research system and help to boost the quality of publicly funded research in Australia. Please find at [Attachment 1](#) a report to DEST that provides a summary of discussions from this workshop. The Academy considers that this report and accompanying letter provide a more expedient submission at this stage of the process and have therefore not undertaken the formal structured response.

The Academy of Science has also provided input to the National Academies Forum submission on the RQF process.

In summary, a model of faculty/departmental-level assessment involving self-assessment against a menu of performance areas (accompanied by guidance on appropriate metrics and review by blended expert/peer panels) had broad support as a potentially effective and workable model for an RQF.

The Academy also applauds the consultative approach taken thus far in the RQF process and considers continued stakeholder engagement and input into the design as crucial for the acceptance of a new RQF by the wider research community.

Further key outcomes from the Academy workshop are provided below:

Prime objective/directive

A Research Quality Framework (RQF) should be designed to encourage better performance within the research system, with the concept of excellence being central to the definition of quality of research.

Guiding principles

Consideration should be given to the 'unit of assessment' - perhaps using the department/faculty as the unit may be the most expedient method, ie. rather than the individual.

Training should be included alongside research outputs within a RQF and the process must ensure that the research doctorate standards are not eroded.

The inclusion of 'early career researcher performance' is needed to ensure that emerging excellence is captured within the RQF process. Nurturing the next generation of researchers should be an important purpose for an RQF.

It was generally agreed that commercialisation outcomes should not be considered within a RQF, ie. commercialisation outcomes are not the same as research quality.

The National Research Priorities are not relevant to a quality assessment process and should not be incorporated within the RQF.

Avoid system designs that: produce negative perceptions or consequences at the institutional level (eg. New Zealand scoring system); lead to 'safe' at the expense of 'risky' research; focus on short-term at the expense of long-term outcomes.

Scope and approach

The Academy considered that it would be desirable to include as many public research institutions within the RQF as possible – with the proviso that there was no attempt to 'claw back' funding across the research system. The inclusion of a diverse range of institutions within the RQF is seen as critical, however this would preclude linking outcomes to funding via a 'simple' formula – ie. diverse ways of judging performance would be required. A plurality of research funding mechanisms and a diversity of research management practices has served this country well.

An approach that was generally endorsed was to include all players within the research system in the RQF but then to use diverse ways of judging performance and keep funding pools separate for different categories of institutions (as is currently the case).

Timing

If the RQF is not to be linked to formulaic funding, less frequent assessment is required. However, if funding follows the formulaic approach, then the RQF would need to be repeated at a more frequent interval.

Measures of quality

The importance of leaders and the direction of funds to leaders was supported. However, publication and citation counts were considered flawed and vulnerable to 'gaming'. It was agreed that a variety of existing metrics should be used as the 'portfolio of evidence', with peers/experts providing further selective analysis. It was also considered that such 'portfolio's of evidence' should not be subject to probity audit, as this would be demeaning to the research community.

Expert review panels

It was generally agreed that the RQF should involve a system of expert review of research outputs – both to assess quality and to have credibility within the research community.

A blended panel system of experts was proposed as the best way forward, with enough discipline expertise to assess research outputs of specific disciplines, but enough breadth of perspective to ensure consistency across discipline areas and multi-disciplinary research outputs. A caveat to this was that there would need to be enough such panels to prevent excessive workloads. Some international representation on the panels was seen as essential, as was some form of protection for panels to ensure that reports are not self-censored.

Uptake

Having significant funding attached to the first round would facilitate the RQF being taken seriously and make it worthwhile. Incremental introduction of funding changes over several years would foster orderly adjustment by the system. Funding pools should be kept separate as is currently the case.

Prior to implementation of an RQF, modelling of the funding implications, including unintended consequences, of a range of 'mock assessment measures' is vital. Such unintended consequences may relate to the various mechanisms used such as capping and phasing.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. J. Peacock', written in a cursive style.

W J Peacock