

Innovative Research Universities Australia

Response to RQF Guiding Principles

August 2006

INNOVATIVE **R**ESEARCH **U**NIVERSITIES **AUSTRALIA**

Flinders University • Griffith University • La Trobe University
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Introduction

The Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU Australia) thanks the RQF Development Advisory Group (RQFDAG) for the opportunity to provide preliminary views on the RQF Guiding Principles. The Group has contributed to the RQF development process from the outset and therefore appreciates the intricate balance required for the RQF to:

- Reward excellent research for both academic quality and broader impact;
- Be rigorous and credible achieving respect both in Australia and overseas;
- Send clear signals to institutions and researchers;
- Encourage positive behaviour and minimise negative outcomes; and
- Minimise the costs and administrative burden on the Government and universities.

The IRU Australia supports many of the propositions put forward for comment in the RQF Guiding Principles document but has significant concerns about suggestions raised in several areas:

1. Who should be assessed? (page 8);
2. Research active staff (page 8);
3. Size of research groupings (page 8);
4. Citation benchmarks (page 10);
5. Research impact (page 12); and
6. Attribution (page 14).

Note that IRU Australia members will be responding separately to the Guiding Principles raising individual concerns and suggestions and these might differ slightly in some respects from the overall Group position.

Development of panel guidelines

Although this response focuses on the Guiding Principles document, the Group also wishes to register its concern about the speed of development of the RQF if it is to be properly implemented in 2008. This is not a criticism of the RQF DAG or the DEST RQF team but more an observation that adequate resources, for preparations by the Department and the sector, are needed if the 2008 timeline is to be met. There is an immediate need to establish discipline-based panels to drive the development of the panel-specific guidelines. Universities cannot plan effectively for an RQF in the absence of guidelines, and more importantly, these are needed well in advance if the RQF is to have the confidence and support of the academic community.

Who should be assessed?

Three options are presented in the Guiding Principles for consideration. On balance, the IRU Australia recommends adoption of the first option – the EAG position.

In supporting the EAG position, the IRU Australia wishes to make it clear that universities should only receive funding on the basis of staff submitted for assessment and should not be penalised in any way for exercising their discretion not to submit eligible staff. The IRU Australia view is consistent with the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) guidelines, which are based on such a principle. The second and third options are viewed as unnecessary and extravagant for an RQF that is seeking to adopt 'light touch' principles.

Drawing on the lessons of the RAE, it can be noted that the proportion of staff selected for assessment is not intended to influence the grading, at least formally, but is nonetheless reported by letter grades denoting the proportion of research-active staff submitted for assessment in each Unit of Assessment (UoA) by each university. No university submitted all research-active staff for assessment in the RAE 2001. However, it can be seen from Table 1 that 32 per cent of groups submitted for assessment did so on the basis of including 95-100 per cent of staff.

Table 1: RAE 2001 Categories for Proportion of Staff Assessed (n=2,598)

| Category | RAE 2001 (n and% in Category) | Cumulative Total |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| A 95-100 per cent of staff submitted | 822 (32%) | 822 (32%) |
| B 80-94.9 per cent | 772 (30%) | 1,594 (62%) |
| C 60-79.9 per cent | 469 (18%) | 2,063 (80%) |
| D 40-59.9 per cent | 294 (11%) | 2,357 (91%) |
| E 20-39.9 per cent | 180 (7%) | 2,537 (98%) |
| F below 20 per cent | 61 (2%) | 2,598 (100%) |

Distribution of 5* Submissions

Attachment One to this submission indicates that in the RAE 2001, 165 of the 284 university departments that received 5* ratings submitted greater than 95 per cent of their research-active staff (A), while a further 92 submitted between 80-94.9 per cent of staff (B), with the other 27 submitting greater than 40 per cent of staff (C and D). No university departments received a 5* rating by submitting fewer than 40 per cent of eligible staff in that discipline (E or F). Of the 716 departments rated '5' in the RAE 2001, only 9 were based on submissions where less than 40 per cent of staff was submitted for assessment.

The UK RAE experience indicates that it is unnecessary to regulate the proportion of staff submitted for assessment – quality attracts quality and it is unusual that a small number of very high quality researchers will remain for long in a university grouping where they form a minority. Assessment of all RQF eligible staff is unnecessary and will add to the expense of the exercise to the Government, the administrative burden on universities, and to the demands placed on Assessment Panel members.

Research active staff and eligibility

It is critical that the definition of "research-active" is workable and therefore the Group supports the DAG definition provided on page 8. The IRU Australia has attempted to arrive at a hard and fast definition of "research active" but found this a challenging exercise even across six universities. While the definition of "research-active" would determine the eligibility of researchers for inclusion in the RQF, this would in no way diminish a university's discretion to choose who is put forward for assessment.

Level A Positions

The IRU Australia has concerns about the continued ineligibility of Level A positions apart from those funded through individual competitive research grants. This sends negative signals to 18 per cent of Australia's academic workforce (almost 5,700 FTE) suggesting to many who have already gained their PhDs that they are 'disenfranchised' from participation in the RQF and that they are employed primarily to teach or to perform low level research underpinning the work of others. In the context of the rapidly ageing academic workforce, inclusion of all academic staff in a culture of research from the outset of their careers is essential if staff are to be encouraged to pursue an academic career. It is therefore recommended that all academic staff whose employment terms include research be deemed eligible for inclusion.

Adjunct and Conjoint Staff¹

The IRU Australia is concerned about the unintended consequences of including adjunct and conjoint staff if this results in universities expending unproductive energy in appointing more adjunct staff particularly raising the possibility of double counting. It is recommended that the research output of adjunct and conjoint appointments be included in the RQF only if they satisfy two conditions:

1. Where they are not otherwise part of the RQF process through their employers (e.g. hospital-based clinical staff); and

¹ Not all IRU Australia universities support the inclusion of adjunct and conjoint staff unless these have a full-time equivalent (FTE) status of 0.4 FTE or above.

2. Where the university is the main provider of their research infrastructure and related support.

This would enable the inclusion of adjunct staff whose research infrastructure and related support comes from the university while excluding those who receive primary support elsewhere (e.g. in medical research institutes). The IRU Australia also argues that the research outputs of eligible adjunct and conjoint staff should be counted not only for the assessment of quality and impact, but also towards the FTE upon which funding would be based. To do otherwise would mean that universities would be unable to continue providing research support for these researchers, as they will not be receiving funding to do so, thus reducing the research capacity of Australia as a whole.

Size of research groupings

There is a good deal of concern amongst IRU Australia members with the suggestion that research groupings would be restricted to a minimum of 10 members and a maximum of 50. The IRU Australia prefers the EAG position that:

"Groupings will be of a sufficient size to protect the anonymity of its researchers, with Chairs of Expert Assessment Panels being allowed to consider special cases of lone researchers in particular discipline areas."

Of equal concern is the final sentence on page 8 of the Guiding Principles which states that Research Groupings would be aggregated to fit with four digit RFCD codes which may be further grouped for Expert Panel assessment, as appropriate.

If Australia is to successfully identify excellence and encourage diversity, then a guiding principle of the RQF might be that size of groupings submitted for assessment should not be restricted. The Government is seeking an RQF that recognises the diversity of approaches by universities to the organisation, management, and conduct of research in order to meet the varied needs of the communities served. Additionally, the Government has encouraged universities to be strategic and diverse in how they target their research efforts resulting in initiatives that are breaking new ground and defying standard classifications.

This view is supported by the underlying figures behind Attachment One, where we note that 5* submissions in the British RAE 2001 ranged in size from 0.5 FTE (Institute of Classical Studies at UCL which incidentally scored a 5* Category A) to 219.36 FTE at Imperial College London (Clinical Laboratory Sciences UoA). More than 60 per cent of departments rated 5* in RAE 2001 contained greater than 20 FTE while approximately 16 per cent were greater than 50 FTE. Of the 30 groupings with fewer than 10 FTE, 28 of these were in Units of Assessment 36 (Law) and above. This suggests that a size restriction on groupings to no fewer than 10 members in the RQF would be a major issue especially for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences and a number of other disciplines (e.g. mathematics and physics).

The suggestion that research groupings would be restricted to a minimum of 10 members and a maximum of 50 appears to be based on little hard evidence about the optimal size for research groupings. The proposed aggregation of research groupings will reduce the ability to identify fine-grained research excellence and reduces the potential for international comparisons.

Citation benchmarks

The IRU Australia supports the range of indicators provided to assess research quality but does not wish to see any organisation enshrined in the RQF process until more details are known (ref point 1.2 – Thomson Scientific). There might well be other alternatives available to proportion publications by discipline into deciles and these alternatives need to be explored further given the known inadequacies of Thomson Scientific databases for many disciplines.

Research impact

The IRU Australia supports the notion that impact, which occurs within the six-year assessment period, may be based on original research conducted earlier provided that the impact being assessed is directly related to the original research. The case study approach is also supported although some members have suggested that four cases is too small a number for larger research groupings.

The suggestion that all research fields and orientations should be treated equally for impact assessment is manifestly impossible and requires further clarification before the sector can accept such a proposition. Similarly, the requirement that all impact claims be "verifiable and auditable" suggests a black and white approach to impact assessment, which will simply not be the case and will probably not favour the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. This point was noted by the EAG in section 4.1.9 of its Final Advice:

"It must be noted that the extent to which impact can be demonstrated may vary by discipline area. Expert Assessment Panels will need to give careful consideration to this issue."

The IRU Australia also supports the EAG recommendation that research impact should, at least initially, be less finely graded than research quality. Descriptors need to be crystal clear to allow institutions, researchers, and end users to understand these multiple dimensions of impact. The IRU Australia would also prefer to see an overarching preamble to the impact descriptors in the assessment panel guidelines, with specific indicators tailored for each discipline.

Attribution

The IRU Australia shares the concerns raised by the RQF DAG that attributing outputs at the time of publication may reward institutions for the efforts of researchers who have not been employed within that institution for some time. The RQF should encompass some forward-looking components and therefore the alternative put forward to attribute outputs to the institution at which members of research groupings are employed at the staff census date has some merit, and is supported by the following observations from the British RAE:

"Any method that tries to apportion research output pro-rata to the amount of time spent at different HEIs will have its problems. First, the research underpinning a published output could have been conducted some years before its publication; second, such apportionment may be difficult to record and audit."

This option does however open up the prospect of 'poaching' in the period leading up to each RQF. While this aspect of the British RAE is known to have been over-dramatised, there needs to be some disincentive for poaching or at least some mechanisms to ensure that an institution that has supported a researcher for much of the six-year period under assessment is not unduly penalised.

Measures adopted in the RAE 2008 guidelines to lessen the impact of sudden loss of staff include definitions of staff according to four categories, the first two of which are relevant to this issue:

Category A: academic staff in post and on the payroll of the submitting institution on the census date. Eligible Category A academic staff must be employed under a contract of employment with the HEI on the census date. Their contract must list research and/or teaching as their primary function.

Category A staff are counted for both quality and funding.

Category B: academic staff who held a contract with the institution after 1 January 2001 and who left the institution (or transferred into a department returned to a different UOA) after that date and before the census date, and who otherwise would have been eligible for inclusion as Category A.

Category B staff may be counted towards the quality but not the funding of the 'losing' institution.

The IRU Australia would support the alternative proposed by the RQF DAG provided it is accompanied by a similar safety net.

On-going validity of EAG Final Advice

The comments provided above are done so on the understanding that the EAG Final Advice remains valid for details not specifically referred to within the RQF DAG Guiding Principles.

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25th August 2006

ATTACHMENT ONE

Distribution of Ratings in RAE 2001 by rating and size of department

| RAE 2001 Rating | | Number of University Departments in Category | Percentage of Departments with <10FTE | Percentage of Departments with 10-50 FTE | Percentage of Departments with >50 FTE |
|-----------------|---|--|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| 5* | A | 165 | 18.18 | 65.45 | 16.36 |
| 5* | B | 92 | 9.78 | 73.91 | 16.30 |
| 5* | C | 22 | 22.73 | 68.18 | 9.09 |
| 5* | D | 5 | 40.00 | 60.00 | 0.00 |
| 5 | A | 294 | 21.43 | 73.13 | 5.44 |
| 5 | B | 296 | 18.24 | 73.31 | 8.45 |
| 5 | C | 96 | 19.79 | 70.83 | 9.38 |
| 5 | D | 21 | 38.10 | 57.14 | 4.76 |
| 5 | E | 7 | 85.71 | 14.29 | 0.00 |
| 5 | F | 2 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 4 | A | 208 | 40.38 | 59.13 | 0.48 |
| 4 | B | 234 | 20.09 | 74.36 | 5.56 |
| 4 | C | 133 | 33.83 | 59.40 | 6.77 |
| 4 | D | 62 | 45.16 | 50.00 | 4.84 |
| 4 | E | 21 | 38.10 | 61.90 | 0.00 |
| 4 | F | 5 | 40.00 | 60.00 | 0.00 |
| 3a | A | 96 | 69.79 | 30.21 | 0.00 |
| 3a | B | 105 | 33.33 | 64.76 | 1.90 |
| 3a | C | 128 | 56.25 | 43.75 | 0.00 |
| 3a | D | 98 | 41.84 | 56.12 | 2.04 |
| 3a | E | 60 | 51.67 | 48.33 | 0.00 |
| 3a | F | 12 | 83.33 | 16.67 | 0.00 |
| 3b | A | 38 | 73.68 | 26.32 | 0.00 |
| 3b | B | 30 | 53.33 | 46.67 | 0.00 |
| 3b | C | 61 | 65.57 | 34.43 | 0.00 |
| 3b | D | 71 | 50.70 | 49.30 | 0.00 |
| 3b | E | 58 | 56.90 | 43.10 | 0.00 |
| 3b | F | 20 | 80.00 | 20.00 | 0.00 |
| 2 | A | 17 | 88.24 | 11.76 | 0.00 |
| 2 | B | 14 | 64.29 | 35.71 | 0.00 |
| 2 | C | 27 | 66.67 | 33.33 | 0.00 |
| 2 | D | 33 | 63.64 | 36.36 | 0.00 |
| 2 | E | 29 | 79.31 | 20.69 | 0.00 |
| 2 | F | 20 | 95.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 1 | A | 4 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 1 | B | 1 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 1 | C | 2 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 1 | D | 4 | 75.00 | 25.00 | 0.00 |
| 1 | E | 5 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 1 | F | 2 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Total | | 2598 | 36.91 | 58.28 | 4.81 |