

Research Assessment Exercise 2006

Information Note

Introduction

This information note provides general principles on how the University Grants Committee (UGC) will assess the research output performance of the UGC-funded institutions (by cost center) in future. It sets out the results of a review of the current Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) mechanism as well as the changes to the design and implementation of future assessment exercises.

Background

2. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) mechanism was first developed and implemented during the period from 1991 to 1994, primarily to inform the distribution of the research fund ('R' funding) within the recurrent block grants, to discharge public accountability and to induce improvements in research.

3. Three assessment exercises took place at three-year intervals to coincide with the triennial funding cycle: the first RAE in 1993, the second in 1996 and the third in 1999. Subsequent to the completion of RAE 1999, the UGC decided that future RAEs should be undertaken at 6-year intervals and so the next exercise should be conducted in 2005/06.

Review of the Current RAE Mechanism

4. Undoubtedly, the previous RAEs have helped to encourage the development of a robust and vibrant research culture in the UGC-funded institutions and to drive a sustained improvement in research activities, in terms of both quality and quantity of output. It has also served as a basis for the allocation of a portion of the block grant attributable to research (the 'R' funding), in a manner that is generally regarded as fair.

5. Nonetheless, there are concerns that the RAE, in its traditional form, has driven institutions to put undue emphasis on research because of the significant marginal return involved – as compared to teaching. Other comments relate to the perceived mechanical process, the perceived narrow

focus on traditional research, insufficient differentiation in performance at the top-end and the absence of any consideration of institutional roles.

6. Having considered the concerns of various sectors of the local higher education community regarding the existing RAE mechanism, the UGC decided at its April 2004 meeting that an Research Ad Hoc Group (RAG) should be formed to consider the wider issue of the UGC's overall quality assurance activities in research and to recommend how future assessments should be conducted.

7. In the course of the review, the RAG not only reviewed the existing RAE mechanism but also re-visited the basic principles of research assessments. The RAG noted that the funding to be allocated on the basis of RAE was not just research funding, but the research portion of educational funding. As such, the UGC should place the creation and enhancement of educational capacity at the forefront, and emphasize the synergy between research and education. In doing so, the UGC should strike a balance between more basic research and applied research with a shorter lead-time to possible economic/social benefits. In particular, the UGC affirms that research works that lead to *generalizable* results, which thus benefit the community or even humanity as a whole, and which are therefore core activities of universities, should be funded by the UGC.

8. The RAG also considered various options for future assessments of research capabilities of the local higher education sector, including a sharpened RAE, a comprehensive audit and shifting a significant portion of 'R' funding of the block grant to the Research Grants Council (RGC). The RAG was also mindful of the UGC's desire to ensure that teaching is given equal, if not higher, emphasis by institutions and also that the role of institutions is fully taken into account.

9. During the process, the UGC has, on the advice of the RAG, sought views from institutions on the broad principles of future research assessments of the higher education sector.

Institutions' Views

10. In general, institutions recognize that the past RAEs have driven a remarkable and sustained improvement in the research performance of the higher education sector, both in terms of quality and quantity. Furthermore, the preference of the majority of institutions is to maintain an RAE-like assessment mechanism, though with improvements better to evaluate disciplines such as Education, Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies.

As regards the proposal for moving a substantial amount of 'R' funding to the RGC through a competitive-based system, the views are strongly divided but with the majority appearing to have strong reluctance. Several institutions indicated that it might not be fair to disciplines such as Education, Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies which usually only need require research support in terms of staff time (funded from block grant) rather than equipment, consumables or research assistants (funded from the RGC).

11. In the long run, institutions generally agree that the research performance of an institution should be measured through a more comprehensive system. In addition to the quality of research work of an institution, other important factors including the role and mission, the research strategy, and the infrastructure of an institution should be taken into account.

UGC's decisions on the future mode of research assessment

12. One of the options that had been considered by the UGC was a Comprehensive Review/Audit, which would aim to review all aspects of institutions' operations including role, research, teaching, management etc. After due consideration, the UGC concluded that while such a review had considerable overall merit, it might not be the best tool to inform funding on research which could be measured and benchmarked objectively. Instead, the UGC decided that the current form of RAE should remain as the core factor for assessing research performance of the sector and form part of the base for informing funding allocation in relation to research activities.

The Next RAE

General Principles

13. The UGC considers that the next RAE should be conducted basically on similar lines to RAE 1999 for disbursing the majority of the "R" funding in the block grants for the 2008-11 triennium, but the threshold standard should be moderately raised to emphasize quality. The UGC has also considered it appropriate to include fractional scores so that all university-level teachers could aspire to doing quality research which was recognized, but nevertheless do so in an environment which did not force this to the exclusion of all else. Institutions will be consulted on the details of the next RAE in early 2005.

The Four Carnegie Scholarships

14. To address the perceived bias in favour of basic/traditional research,

the UGC has decided to reinforce the use of the Carnegie definition of scholarship in the research assessment mechanism. Thus, the RAE 2006 will continue that approach and reinforce the message that high quality research and scholarship should be encouraged and assessed across a broad front. It will identify and measure, on the basis of outputs, the following kinds of scholarships:

- (a) scholarship of discovery;
- (b) scholarship of integration;
- (c) scholarship of application; and
- (d) scholarship of teaching.

For more information about the Carnegie definition, you may wish to refer to previous documents uploaded on the web in preparing for the RAE 1999 at <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/english/documents/rae99ws02/sld007.htm> and <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/english/documents/RAE99/raegn99f.html>

Recognition at the Top-end

15. It is acknowledged that the RAE, in its traditional form, does not differentiate performance at the top-end. An option that has been considered is a sharpened RAE (i.e. 5-point scale with the value 3 equating to the designation of fully active in previous exercises). However, the UGC is doubtful of its practicality and effectiveness in the evaluation of research performance in the context of Hong Kong. Assessment at the top end (between points 3, 4 and 5) can be difficult since it would require detailed reading of the submitted items, which in many cases demand expertise of specialized subjects. This problem can be further compounded with other problems such as local assessors running into conflict of interests and overseas assessors not having sufficient understanding of the local context.

16. An alternative to sharpening the RAE could be to allocate some additional funding to the RGC (primarily to the Competitive Earmarked Research Grant), operating through a rigorous peer review mechanism with a view to identifying and rewarding research performance at the top-end. The UGC considers that, subject to the funding level of 2007-08 and the 2008-11 triennium, a small percentage of total funding (low single digit) should be allocated from 'R' funding of the block grant to the RGC. In doing so, the RGC would also take into account the special needs of particular disciplines (e.g. Education, Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies) that often only require research support in terms of freeing up staff time rather than research infrastructure or research assistants.

Timetable

17. In order to tie in with the recurrent funding assessment for the triennium 2008-2011, the UGC plans to conduct the next (also fourth) RAE in 2005/06. The census date for the next exercise will be in the latter half of 2005 and submissions will be called for in early 2006.

Transparency

18. In the past RAEs, the results were only released to the institutions concerned on a confidential basis and practically, no data were published for general information¹.

19. As pointed out in the Higher Education Review (HER) Report 2002, the UGC is aware that in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, there are strong demands for greater accountability and transparency from public sector bodies. In addition, the Director of Audit has also commented that there was a lack of transparency in our RAE mechanism. Having regard to these two developments, the UGC agrees that in line with the principle of public accountability, there is a general need to publish and share the results with major stakeholders in a suitable form. For this purpose, the UGC endorses the following be published for general information:

- (a) operational details of the process, such as panel membership, evaluation methodology and the meeting schedules of panels, will be published for general information;
- (b) RAE results at the sector level will be published;
- (c) at the institutional level, aggregate results in broad disciplinary areas will be published; and
- (d) some reading guides will be developed to help the public and the press understand the statistics and appreciate the trend of research performance of the higher education sector in the past years.

¹ In RAE 1993, each institution was provided the proportion of Full-time Equivalent Active Researchers as well as the panels' comments on the research activities of certain cost centers in the institutions. In RAE 1996 and RAE 1999, in addition to the information released in the first RAE, each institution was provided the research index and the staff in full-time equivalents meeting the threshold standards (by cost center) as well as the average and median sector-wide research index (by cost center) so that they could have a rough indication of the level of attainment of a particular cost center. But, the sector-wide average and median indices of cost centers that were found in fewer than three institutions were not released. Moreover, the results of an institution were only provided to the university concerned and were not made known to other institutions or the public. This was to avoid misinterpretation by casual comparison of the results of different institutions, or misuse of these data.

Concern on Role

20. On the concerns related to role, the UGC considers that an RAE which genuinely factors in the four Carnegie domains, coupled with a strong and improving Performance and Role-related Funding Scheme should be sufficient to ensure performance to role and full cognizance of the importance of teaching. This is because the former has broadened the interpretation of research while the latter serves as the quality assurance instrument to encourage institutions' adherence to their respective roles.

UGC Secretariat
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