



Australian Government

Department of Education, Science and Training

Research Quality Framework

RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES PAPER

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF DEANS OF EDUCATION (ACDE)

THE RESEARCH QUALITY FRAMEWORK

Response to the Issues Paper – How to Make a Submission

This submission template should be used for responding to the Issues Paper for the Research Quality Framework.

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You should use this template to make a submission to the consultation process. The sections in the template correspond to the numbered sections in the Issues Paper and the propositions posed in the Issues Paper are repeated in the template. Please provide your responses to the questions in the relevant spaces on the pro forma.

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If you have additional ideas or comments on areas not addressed in the Paper we would welcome those at the end of your submission.

What contact details are required?

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If you are not able to email your response you can send a hard copy to:

The RQF Submissions Officer
Research Quality Assessment Framework Team, Loc. 767
Innovation & Research Systems
Department of Education, Science and Training
GPO Box 9880
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Or by fax to (02) 6123 5717

Submissions sent by email or fax will not be considered valid until an original signed cover sheet has been received by DEST.

The closing date for submissions is **COB (6pm) Monday 2 May 2005**.

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THE RESEARCH QUALITY FRAMEWORK (RQF)

Responses to the Issues Paper – Submission Cover Page

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Is the submission made on behalf of an organisation? (Y/N) Yes

If No:

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If Yes:

Name of Organisation	Australian Council of Deans of Education				
Address of Organisation	c/- The University of Newcastle				
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Signature					

A report on the outcomes of this submission process will be prepared by the Department and/or external consultants which will be made publicly available on the Department's website. Quotes may be used from submissions in this report. Does the organisation consent to being identified in a report?	Yes
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RESEARCH QUALITY FRAMEWORK (RQF)

Responses to the Issues Paper

Part 2: Creating an Australian RQF

Please indicate your response by placing an X in the relevant box.

2.1 Structuring an RQF

Issue 1: How should an RQF be applied to universities and publicly funded research agencies?

(a) An RQF should be applied in the same way to both universities and publicly funded research agencies.

Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment

Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

(b) Within the university sector, an RQF should be applied differentially to specific types of institutions.

Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment

Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

The Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) believes that Australia would be poorly served by a 'one size fits all' approach to assessing research quality. The choices are to devise a single set of measures broadly pitched to take fair and even account of the variety of research sites and forms, including disciplinary idiosyncrasies, or to establish separate measures that do justice to these particular sites and forms. While the former option is plausible, that is, that a single set of measures could be established that includes the capacity to be applied in widely different ways, ACDE would not be optimistic that this option would not lead inevitably to a skewing towards the productivities of the Sciences, Engineering and Technology (SET) and away from those of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) where most educational research productivity will be found.

This scepticism is well founded on current practice which sees the major productivities of educational research either count for little or not count at all. The DEST 'Impact Study' (*The Impact of Educational Research, 2000*) found that research does provide a substantial basis for educational practice, however the research that was working in this way was too rarely included in the 'de facto' measures to be found in the audits of schemes such as the current IGS or RTS. As with so much HASS research, impact is less likely to be found emanating from the likes of a Discovery Grant or PhD as from a well-targetted publication, policy-related research-into-practice, or from small scale projects performed in a particular site for a purpose designated by the clients and/or subjects of the research. While ACDE does not wish to see educational research discounted from assessment on the large scale (ie. through large funded projects, PhD completions and high end publications), it would be adamant that damage will ultimately be done to effective educational research if measures are not devised that encourage the reality that research impact is normally to be found elsewhere. In this regard, the concerns of educational research fit well with those of HASS generally.

In a word, the development of a Research Quality Framework (RQF) is an opportunity to acknowledge the reality of diversity in the higher education sector, a diversity characterized by different kinds of institutions and different disciplines, the latter each with their own traditions, contexts and challenges. None of these should be made subservient to others in terms of measuring research quality and impact. The RQF should be constructed therefore in a way that will enable institutions to move within the framework according to their distinctive directions and allow each discipline to be fairly assessed

according to the terms of reference that generally apply internationally whenever that discipline is subject to productivity assessment.

The above is not to argue that some measure of comparison across higher education institutions should not be able to be applied. The comparative purpose of the RQF, however, should not overwhelm the imperative of fair assessment of institutions and disciplines in ways that encourage, rather than discourage, productivity in all institutions and across all disciplines.

2.2 Defining and measuring research quality and impact

Issue 2: Research quality and impact should be assessed by appropriately constituted panels.

- Strongly agree
 Strongly disagree
 No comment
 Somewhat agree
 Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

ACDE supports the notion of a 'light touch' RQF that employs a wide set of quantitative indicators, but above all makes use of peer assessment through appropriately constituted panels which focus attention on evidence of research quality and impact. ACDE would encourage some discretion on the part of institutions to submit for quality assessment those areas which it believes fits with their individual profile. It believes that it is imperative that the RQF be underpinned by recognition of the breadth of research areas. It is in accord with the concerns of CHASS in this regard. It is aware that the IRUA has proposed a Broad Areas of Research table, constituting a slight amendment of the current New Zealand table. This table (Table 1 below) includes each of the main areas of HASS research, including Education as a distinctive category. ACDE believes that ongoing encouragement of educational research, once a proud feature of Australian research but flagging under current policy, impels that a separate Education category be part and parcel of the broad areas of research that underpin the RQF.

Table 1: Possible RQF Broad Areas of Research

Broad Areas of Research	Subject Areas (illustrative)
Biological Sciences	Agriculture, ecology, molecular, cellular and whole of organism biology
Business and Economics	Accounting, finance, economics, management, human resources, industrial relations, international business, marketing, tourism.
Creative and Performing Arts	Design, music, literacy arts, theatre and dance, film, television and multimedia, visual arts.
Education	Education
Engineering, Technology and Development	Engineering, urban development, architecture, design, surveying, technology.
Environmental Sciences	Environmental Sciences
Health	Dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, sport and exercise sciences, veterinary studies.
Humanities and Law	English languages and literature, cultural studies, foreign languages and linguistics, history, law, philosophy, religious studies and theology
Indigenous Studies	Indigenous Studies and application of Indigenous Knowledge
Mathematical and Information Sciences and Technology	Pure and applied mathematics, statistics, computer science, information technology, information sciences.

Broad Areas of Research	Subject Areas (illustrative)
Medicine	Biomedical and clinical medicine
Physical and Chemical Sciences	Physics, Chemistry, Earth Sciences
Public Health	Public health
Social Sciences	Anthropology and archaeology, communications, journalism and media studies, human geography, political science, international relations, public policy, psychology and behavioural sciences, sociology, social work, criminology, gender studies.

2.3 Measuring research quality and impact

Issue 3: Assessment panel members should include the following (the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive):

(a) Experts reviewers able to assess impact in a discipline area/academic field.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
 Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

(b) Expert reviewers able to assess impact more widely.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
 Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

(c) International expert reviewers.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
 Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

On the basis of earlier comment, it is vital that panels be maximally informed about the internationally recognized benchmarks of the discipline(s) in question. This determines the necessity of the panel being comprised of experts as determined by the Broad Areas of Research, and preferably with some international input into this expertise. Granted the breadth of productivities even within any one of the broad areas of research, it would be helpful also to have panels comprised of people with some knowledge and expertise of the array of research types, at least as characterized by the broad SET and HASS labels. This would be particularly important for an area like Education where the productivities, while most likely to be found in HASS dimensions, will also be found among SET dimensions. Such broad-based panels should also alleviate one of the major concerns often expressed about peer-reviewing measures, namely about the potential intensity and 'heavy touch' nature of such an exercise. ACDE reiterates that it believes the sustainability and effectiveness of an RQF will be determined by the extent that it is 'light touch'.

Issue 4: Assessment panels should be informed by metrics whose nature and relative influence may vary across different disciplines.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
 Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

Although ACDE sees greater merit in qualitative assessment for the quality and impact of most of the productivities of educational research, it sees value in maintaining a measure of metrics for three main reasons. First is that, unlike some areas of HASS, there is still substantial educational research that would be best measured by quantitative means, including areas like educational technology, educational

psychology or science education where the measures will likely fit more closely with those appropriate to SET. Second is the fact that, unlike some of the areas of HASS, Education productivity counts are still more than respectable when measured against the likes of PhD completions and publications (even as currently defined) and, for some Education faculties, quite respectable also when the measure is large funded grants. Third, maintaining metrics as part of the measures is a way of facilitating the 'light touch' approach so essential to the sustainability and effectiveness of the RQF. While there will always be controversy about how metrics are applied, as indeed there is about qualitative criteria as well, nonetheless a well-conceived set of metrics does allow for at least a portion of the total assessment to be done in a relatively non-burdensome way.

While ACDE therefore favours the use of metrics, it would argue that these need to be carefully selected with the range of disciplines in mind, and that any particular set of measures should only be applied once there is satisfaction that they can be meaningfully applied to the discipline in question. Inevitably, there will be some metrics which will be more sensitive to disciplinary considerations than others, such as the funding quantity of a grant, numbers of PhD completions and publication citation rates. While these will constitute appropriate measures for all disciplines to an extent, they will be more fairly applied to some rather than others. They should not therefore constitute the entirety of the metrics.

CHASS may well argue for metrics that include items like numbers of exhibitions, keynote addresses and numbers of professional journal publications, as well as numbers of items against measures of public intellectual impact. ACDE would concur with these as appropriate subjects for metrics but would wish to emphasize also the importance of metrics that take account of items like the number of times a particular researched policy impacts on practice, the numbers of times a particular text demonstrably influences a system's curriculum choices, the number of times an action research project impacts on school practice, and a range of other productivities with clear impact on Education's professional world. Much of the work of educational researchers focusses on educational policy and the practical work of teachers and schools. Much of this is able to be quantified, including through publications that currently do not count in the DEST audit. These include government policy documents, curriculum documents and school text material. In short, any system of metrics needs to be crafted with the discipline's impact targets in mind in order to be a fair measure of impact.

2.4 Measuring research impact

Issue 5 (a): An RQF should recognise research impact through the measurement of different outcomes for different types of research and disciplines.

Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment

Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Issue 5 (b): An RQF should recognise the production and diffusion of technology and knowledge as elements of research impact.

Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment

Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Issue 5 (c): Where appropriate, users and those commissioning research should contribute to the assessment process by providing an external perspective on research under consideration.

Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment

Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

For reasons already noted, ACDE argues for recognition of differentiation across institutions and disciplines. While it does not resile entirely from the need for comparisons to be made across institutions and disciplines, its experience is that 'one size fits all' tends too easily towards setting the standards by the measures more appropriate to the SET disciplines and consequently leading to a skewing of effort if not downright disincentive in the HASS disciplines, including Education. Earlier measures taken of Australian educational research impact showed evidence of Australia 'punching well beyond its weight'. More recent evidence is of serious decline in educational research funding and effort owing no doubt to the combined effects of general under-resourcing of the area and to a fairly malevolent set of de facto research measures, based solely on a limited theory of knowledge production.

The propositions above represent movement in the right direction. If research quality and impact are measured differentially in ways that are sensitive to the real research contexts of each discipline and users of the research of a particular discipline are involved in the assessment of impact, then the field should turn naturally towards a broader theory of knowledge production. This broader theory would recognize that knowledge is produced in a variety of ways, some of it in traditional, investigator-driven and discrete discipline ways but also increasingly is produced in context-driven and inter-disciplinary ways, often around solving a particular professional or industry problem. Again, the DEST 'Impact Study' referred to above illustrated that much educational research impacts in this kind of way.

Part 3: Applying an Australian RQF

Please indicate your response by placing an X in the relevant box.

3.1 Level of aggregation for assessment

Issue 6: What is the most appropriate level of aggregation for assessment?

- Subject/discipline area
- Research grouping/research team/s
- Department/schools
- Faculties/Divisions
- Institutional level - university/PFRA

Additional comment:

If the ultimate goal of the RQF is, as purported, to identify where the highest quality research is occurring, then aggregation by areas of research strength is the best way forward. Assessment at the institutional, faculty or departmental levels will lead more naturally to results around institutional rankings. Such rankings may satisfy more short-term goals related to funding distribution but are inadequate in identifying the best clusters of research, tend not to do justice to particular disciplines and may well serve as a disincentive towards research in some institutions and disciplines.

Issue 7: Who should be assessed as part of an RQF?

Eligible staff nominated by institutions (based on guidelines to be provided)

All eligible staff

Additional comments

ACDE recommends that each nominated research area should be free to submit its best outputs for assessment, both in terms of researchers and their products. While it is meaningless to expect that all university staff should be assessed in research terms, even if not research active, it is necessary that a minimum proportion of staff (say 75%) be included before any institutional comparisons are made. This is to avoid the skewing that could occur if an institution was free simply to submit their top researchers' productivities as being representative of the institution at large.

3.3 Link to training of researchers

Issue 8: The training received by higher degree students in research requires a separate quality audit and/or assessment process.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
- Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

Research Training is a vital component of research activity and so must be included in any assessment of the quality and/or impact of an area of research. Research training also provides insight into the capacity of an area to re-generate itself, stretch the boundaries of knowledge and apply its research to particular problems or issues related to the area's professional or community outlets. Consistent with the entire purpose of the RQF, ACDE would argue that the emphasis must be on the quality and impact of the RHD product, not merely on the quantity of completions. A widely held perception in the sector at present is that the current 'count' on completions has led to increased activity in PhD enrolment and completion but has not necessarily impacted positively on the quality of work being achieved. Indeed, some would argue that the opposite is the case.

ACDE recommends the following research training quality measures:

1. Thesis quality using the data obtained from examiners' reports conforming to national benchmarking in a discipline;
2. Publications authored (in part) by research students on the basis of the thesis and completed during or after the thesis completion.

3.4 Focus of assessment

Issue 9: Assessment for an RQF should include a forward-looking strategic element as well as being based on past performance.

Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment

Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

ACDE believes that 'Capacity' (as defined by the CHASS Reference Group) should be included as an indicator, along with 'Quality' and 'Impact'. While clearly related to these two indicators, 'Capacity' offers a more explicit way of conceiving of the ramifications of research productivity on the future shape, form and directionality of a discipline. This notion has particular currency for the RHD component, where quality and impact connotes an explicit stretching of boundaries, captured in the requirement that a thesis offer an 'original contribution', or be 'creative' or 'innovative'. Such connotations have clear ramifications for the future of research in a discipline. If the PhD is working in the way the rhetoric suggests, it should be opening up new possibilities in a discipline, be it in terms of new insights, new research questions or ongoing problem-solving. The PhD, more explicitly than any other feature of research, should be guaranteeing a static-free future for research in a discipline. As such, the measures applied in assessing quality and impact should take account of this particular feature. As suggested, ACDE believes this account could well be taken by reference to the notion of 'Capacity'. Furthermore, ACDE believes that the notion of 'Capacity' could be applied more widely to capture a much-needed forward-looking dimension in research productivity.

3.5 Reporting arrangements

Issue 10: How should the outcomes of an RQF be reported?

(a) Reporting the outcomes of an RQF should be aligned to:

- Subject/discipline areas
- Research grouping/research team/s
- Department/schools
- Faculties/Divisions
- Institutional level – university/PFRA

(b) Reporting on subject/discipline areas within any level of aggregation for the RQF should be aligned to the ABS RFCD codes or an appropriate subset.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
- Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

For reasons already outlined, ACDE favours a reporting of research productivity at the level of the research grouping. It does not favour the use of ABS RFCD as this latter does not easily capture the kinds of productivities with which Education tends to deal, including the multi-disciplinary research which is so much at the heart of a multi-disciplinary field like Education.

Issue 11: What should be the format of the ratings/rankings/benchmarks of an RQF? Please provide examples.

ACDE recommends the following:

- 30-50% (research grouping to nominate) being accorded to the quantitative measures around funded projects, PhD completions and 'publications' (the latter in a form expanded to take better account of a wider array of discipline productivities, including those of a professional discipline like Education as well as those of the creative disciplines).
- 30-50% (research grouping to nominate) being accorded to the qualitative measures emanating from peer review for Quality and Impact.
- Up to 20% (research grouping to nominate) being accorded to the qualitative measures emanating from peer review for Capacity, with special but not exclusive reference to research training.

The above should form the basis for any assessment that might flow downwards from the research grouping to individual researchers or upwards to discipline, faculty or institutional comparisons.

3.6 Links to funding

Issue 12: The resource intensity required for an RQF should be directly related to the level of funding that it informs.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
 Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

ACDE would argue that the ultimate sustainability of the RQF will be assured only if funding is seen to follow the measures in a fair and transparent way. Additionally, it would argue that even the lightest touch RQF will inevitably be more burdensome than the status quo and that improved levels of funding should follow in order to maximize the incentive for research stakeholders to participate fully in the scheme and for the scheme to have maximum credibility.

3.7 Administrative benefits

Issue 13: An RQF ought to lead to commensurate reductions in reporting requirements for other Australian Government research accountability mechanisms.

- Strongly agree Strongly disagree No comment
 Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree

Additional comments

In line with the above comment, the potential benefits of the RQF will be diluted if it simply adds another layer of higher education accountability, rightly deemed to be excessive in the current era. This includes especially the accountabilities attached to current research counts which are not only burdensome but whose criteria are elusive to all but the most ardent follower and which seem to render financial returns that are not commensurate with the effort expended. Apart from its other benefits, the RQF must serve to alleviate this situation. This is the main reason that ACDE continues to press for a 'light touch' approach.

OTHER COMMENTS

If you have additional ideas or comments on areas not addressed in the paper we invite you to provide these in this submission.

ACDE endorses strongly the need for a suitably styled RQF and commends the strong level of consultation that has so far characterized its construction. As it represents a set of stakeholders vital to Australia's future, it commends the above earnestly held views to the Expert Advisory Group.