

UK Research Funding to Reward Economic Benefits

25 September 2009, by Lin Edwards

(PhysOrg.com) -- The UK government is developing a new scheme, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), to assess university research proposals and allocate public funds for research. The scheme is being developed in collaboration with higher education bodies in Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland, and will make much greater use of quantitative information (bibliometrics) than its predecessor.

The REF will come into effect in 2012 to replace the current system of assessment, the [Research Assessment Exercise \(RAE\)](#). The scheme will allocate the 1.76 billion British pounds (approximately \$2.7 billion US) spent annually on university research according to three main elements -- outputs, impact, and environment -- which are considered to be indicative of excellence in research.

The first factor the REF will consider is outputs, which will be reviewed by a panel of experts who take into account factors such as citations to the work. The second is the impact of the work; research that demonstrably benefits the economy, public policy, society, culture or quality of life, will attract the greatest funding. The impact will be assessed by a case study approach. The third factor is environment, which will consider the research department's ability to support continuous excellent research and disseminate the results. This will look at factors such as the department's staff, training for postgraduates, research strategies, and public relations.

The new system aims to put an end to research the government has criticized in the past, such as "David Beckham studies" and "surf studies", and to stop the practice of hiring "star" academics to boost results. The scheme is also intended to steer universities towards research that will have economic, social and cultural benefits, since these projects will receive the greatest funding.

The director of research at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), David Sweeney, said the new system is designed to ensure public funds are used effectively. The scheme would apply to research in humanities and arts as well as in science, and aims to develop internationally recognized and competitive research that contributes to the nation's prosperity and wellbeing.

Academics have warned the new system will mean an end to speculative research, for which the economic or other benefits are unknown until the research has been done. The University and College Union (UCU) is also concerned the emphasis on citations will distort academic activity and could threaten academic freedom. UCU's General Secretary Sally Hunt also pointed out that some of the biggest scientific advances have arisen from speculative research. Research should never be measured in purely economic terms, Hunt said.

The HEFCE is currently running a pilot exercise to test their proposed method of assessing the impact of research. It is also continuing consultations on the REF until mid December, and invites responses from universities and interested organizations affected by or using the results of research.

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