

Research Quality Framework FAQs

– a Beginner’s Guide to the RQF

1. Why does Australia need an RQF?

Australia now has a diverse and complex university sector, with around 40 universities all conducting research to some extent. No Australian university is good at everything and all are focussing their research directions in one way or another.

This creates a complex landscape for government and consumers of research – industry, government departments and potential research students, among others. Is the government investment in research paying off? Where’s the best research in a particular field? Who can give me advice to help with my business or policy issues? Where should I go if I want to do a PhD on a particular topic?

A Research Quality Framework – and the associated Research Accessibility Framework – can address these issues. For example, an effective and comprehensive RQF should demonstrate the extent which government’s investment in research is paying off – and hopefully encourage government to increase this investment to yield even greater benefit.

2. So, what is an RQF then?

The RQF is to provide a framework for assessing research performance across research institutions – not just universities, but also other research agencies. As a result, the best research in the country will be identified. This information can then be communicated in some meaningful way to consumers of research via the Accessibility Framework.

Two principal dimensions have been considered for this assessment: quality and impact. However, there are other ways to view this research performance, such as peer esteem, research inputs (such as research grants), research outputs (such as publications) and the research environment in the institution. Different institutions with different approaches to research are likely to suggest different combinations of these dimensions as being most relevant to them.

This is not the first time that an exercise such as the RQF has been proposed or undertaken. There have been similar exercises in the UK, Hong Kong, New Zealand and elsewhere. These have accumulated significant experience on what works and what doesn’t, on what produces desirable behaviours in researchers and institutions, and what produces perverse behaviours. Australia is in a position to design an RQF which builds on this experience.

3. What’s the link between the RQF and funding?

If an RQF is effective at assessing the relative research performance across research institutions, it should probably be used for competitive allocation of funding between them – or at least those that are comparable for this purpose (such as the universities).

Given that the RQF is likely to be costly to implement, especially in its disruption to the research conducted by researchers (while they submit their material for assessment and assess the research of others instead of getting on with their own research), there is an argument for making the RQF worthwhile by having it determine a significant amount of the funding which goes to research institutions. If the RQF demonstrates the quality and impact of Australian research, there is an argument for the RQF to drive the allocation of increased funding for research.

4. What should be assessed?

Other exercises like the proposed RQF have occurred or have been proposed at various levels: the university, departments, research groupings of some kind and the individual.

Given the impetus by the government since 1999 to have universities identify their research strengths, promote these widely and direct their research support towards them, there is a strong argument that the basis of assessment in Australia should be those clusters of researchers which the research institution has identified through these processes. The units chosen by a university may be a mixture of departments, research centres and other clusters or groups which have been defined by the institution.

If a major objective of the RQF is to pinpoint precisely where the best research is taking place and to make that research accessible to the end user, then we need to be able to assess the best research irrespective of how it is arranged.

Allowing institutions to nominate units of research activity gives all research institutions a fair go in putting forward their best areas of research.

5. Why not just assess individual researchers?

Experience from the UK and New Zealand suggests that this would have two main problems. The first is a perverse behaviour which has occurred in the UK: the so-called ‘transfer market’ in the UK for highly rated academics. Although perhaps good for the individuals involved, ratings resulting from importing “talent” at the last minute may mean little in terms of embedded research performance.

The second problem is the most serious: the huge burden on administrators and researchers of assessing every researcher – many of whom would not be classed as research-active. Why should we require thousands of staff to submit null returns when a lot would not claim to be active in research?

6. How might the assessment be conducted?

Units of research activity within and between research institutions can be assessed and compared to some extent by looking at various indicators of research quality and impact: research income, publications, international reputation, impact on industry and local communities, research student outcomes, and so on.

Which of these are most relevant to a particular unit of research nominated by an institution will depend on the kind of research (e.g., science vs. performing arts) and what the institution is trying to achieve within this area of research (e.g., impact on industry vs. impact on the international research community).

Thus, any assessment will have to involve an ingredient of human judgement, in interpreting the relevant performance indicators. Furthermore, this interpretation would have to be carried out relative to the institution’s strategic intent for that unit of research. This argues for the inclusion of statements of strategic intent at the level of these units in the materials provided by institutions.

To gain some efficiency in the assessment of units and to ensure consistency in comparing like units, the most likely approach would be to have 10-15 broad areas of research and to have an assessment panel for each broad area of research. Institutions would nominate the broad area for each specific unit of research.

7. What might an RQF cost?

The British RAE saw £1.06 billion distributed in 2004-05 with the cost of administration estimated at between 2-3 per cent – approximately £20-30 million. Although this seems a reasonable investment at face value, it does not take into account the time spent by thousands of academic and administrators on the RAE. Estimates from the New Zealand Performance-Based Research Fund indicate a figure closer to NZ\$10 million to allocate just NZ\$80 million.

Early estimates point to an Australian RQF costing somewhere in the order of \$25 million for government administration alone, and more than \$50 million when other contributions are taken into account. It could then be argued that the associated funding must be at least \$1 billion for the exercise to be worth the cost and disruption. As far as possible, the intrusion on the research time of researchers should be minimised, say through using electronic means to facilitate assessment processes.

8. How should the outcomes be reported?

A key aspect of an RQF is that which is known as the Accessibility Framework: making information about Australian research strengths available widely to the Australian and international community. As explained above, the RQF has the potential to provide a rich source of information on research in Australia, against dimensions such as peer esteem, research inputs, research outputs and the research environment provided.

It is crucial that the reporting of the outcomes of the RQF reflect this rich source of information, by reporting the assessment of units of research against all relevant dimensions.

Comparisons of institutions are also possible – and likely to be of interest – by, say, a simple calculation of research intensiveness based on the proportion of staff submitted by an institution across all research units and the average ratings of those units, weighted by their size. Well, fairly simple.

Of course, allocation of funding would be based on the number of staff submitted and the average rating obtained for them, weighted by a funding rate for each broad area of research reflecting the cost of research in that area. Another relatively simple calculation once the research units have been rated.

Chris Marlin is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at Flinders University, and the Chair of the Research Group for Innovative Research Universities Australia.