

After RAE2008, Peer Overview

Andrew Oswald
Professor of Economics
University of Warwick

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“4 – Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour... Such work ... has become, or is likely to become, a primary point of reference in its field or sub-field.”*

RAE 2008 www.rae.ac.uk

Slowly, joyfully, painfully, we are coming to terms with the results of the Research Assessment Exercise 2008. For some it ruined Christmas. But world-leading work was found to be widely spread across the universities of the United Kingdom. That is worth knowing. Nevertheless, the 4* label, on a strict interpretation of its definition above, was surely used too liberally, and HEFCE needs to remember that in some subjects critical mass is essential.

I am not convinced that our country should perform this kind of exercise. The really important research would get done without it. What an RAE principally does is to boost the quantity of solid work. It does, admittedly, help some extremely good academics in medium-quality universities to acquire more resources. It also gives vice-chancellors useful ammunition to lay unsettlingly before those who run weak departments. Yet all RAE-like exercises throw a disturbingly black shadow. They lead to short-term thinking; they make researchers focus on the names of journals rather than on ideas; they foster an unhealthy conventionality, and probably not a trivial amount of clinical depression; they encourage a generalized dishonesty where much thought in Senate Houses is put into how unpleasant truths can be covered up; and, perhaps most worryingly, they deter us from putting value on the quality of teaching. It would be better to forget RAE exercises and instead have a large number of independent universities with proper tenure-track positions and with high quality standards enforced, as for Woolworths, and soon for Tottenham Hotspur if they are not careful, by the power of competition and what economists euphemistically call “exit”.

However, if the country insists on evaluation exercises, the next one, known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), should in my judgment use a blend of bibliometrics and what I would term “peer overview”. In other words, peer review teams should be able to look over the bibliometric data to stop the mechanical nature of that approach getting out of hand.

Just as after RAE2001, there has been murmuring about grade inflation in the RAE2008 exercise. What happens if we use a tough, objective standard for deciding on what counts as 4*? I recently was involved in a study of exactly this for the subject of economics. Because my discipline came close to top of all UK university subjects in the latest RAE, it seems a useful example. And the bibliometric method we hit upon can be used in almost any scholarly area. I would like to see our method applied to other UK disciplines.

The method works like this. I and colleagues examined objective data, for the period of 2001-2008, on the world’s most influential economics articles. The aim was to design a practical way to measure the quality of 4* university research.

Following Elhanan Helpman’s new report for the ESRC on the international benchmarking of economics, I collected data on the most-cited articles in 22 well-known economics journals. I found, by this criterion, that the UK produced 10% of the most influential work in the world between 2001 and 2008. For its size the UK economics profession thus came out well -- though I do not think one would say stunningly -- in the objective data.

Among an elite set of 450 genuinely world-leading articles -- these were the most-cited papers produced in the world over the period -- the UK was the source of 45 of them. As an additional exercise, I studied the rest of Europe. The number of influential articles from these countries combined was 56. In other words, the whole of continental Europe (with hundreds of millions of citizens) produced only slightly more of the really important work than the UK (60 million). The US produced the great majority of these 450 articles.

Interestingly, more than a quarter of these objectively important UK articles emanated from departments of economics not normally considered to be in the top half-dozen in this country. This suggests that outstanding work -- a set of genuinely world-leading economics articles -- comes from an enormous range of sources (literally speaking in my data, 21 different universities, but the harsh fact is they were all pre-92 research ones).

My findings, using these objective data on the performance of UK economics, are redolent of those from the official RAE2008 data. First-rate creativity is geographically quite widely spread. It may thus be time to turn away from a modern concern in academia with 'top' departments, 'top' journals, and similar monopoly-creating devices. Competition -- subject to important requirements of critical mass -- works.