

Research Quality Framework (RQF): The Preferred Model

Submission from

UNSW

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Professor Les Field, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)

Email: L.Field@unsw.edu.au

Telephone: 02 9385 2700

Facsimile: 02 9385 8008

1. Introduction

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the *Preferred Model* paper. While there is still a great deal of very critical detail missing on how the RQF will actually operate, UNSW welcomes in principle the overarching framework of the *Preferred Model*.

It is pleasing to see that the Government has adopted many of the recommendations made during the consultation period, following the release of the *RQF Issues Paper* and the *Advanced Approaches Paper*, however, there are still a number of important issues which must be taken into account in developing the RQF, particularly in relation to the Evidence Portfolio and the Contextual Statements.

UNSW is aware of, and fully supports, the submission made by the Go8 particularly in relation to:

- The apparent focus on cost over quality;
- The content of the Evidence Portfolio, and ownership of outputs;
- Contextual Statements to be consistent, factual, objective and verifiable;
- Assessment Panels to be sufficiently and internationally resourced to assess the volume of submissions; and
- Accommodating issues of scale and volume between research groupings

UNSW wishes to make some additional points and comments, either because these are not covered in the Go8 submission, or where UNSW wishes to emphasise points about which we feel strongly.

2. Overarching Comments

a. Quality over cost

UNSW argues that the RQF must not be a "light-assessment", because of the potentially harmful impact on research development. The quality of the exercise must be the overarching objective and must override cost. The RQF must have the confidence of the sector and be accepted as legitimate by those subject to it.

SYDNEY 2052 AUSTRALIA

Telephone: +61 (2) 9385 2700

Facsimile: +61 (2) 9385 8008

Email L.Field@unsw.edu.au

Location: Room 205A, The Chancellery
High Street, Gate 9, Kensington

b. Link to research council funding and allocation of HDR places

While not explicitly stated in the Preferred Model, UNSW notes a comment made in Minister's Foreword that:

"My Department will conduct a process, with the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council, to develop the way in which the outcomes of the RQF will impact on research council funding distributed by the research councils."¹

UNSW is firmly of the belief that funding distributed by the ARC/NHMRC should not in any way be linked to outcomes of the RQF. The ARC/NHMRC programs are explicitly designed to fund Australia's best research. The nature of funding distributed by the ARC/NHMRC's peer review process is a robust quality mechanism in itself and should not be compromised in any way by the RQF.

Similarly, UNSW is firmly of the view that the allocation of research training places should not be linked to the outcomes of the RQF.

c. 3rd stream funding

UNSW would welcome the establishment of new 3rd stream funding based on technology transfer or the uptake of research by industry or the community. Until this occurs, UNSW supports the notion that funding for such activities should be de-coupled from the RQF exercise.

3. Eligibility

UNSW does not support the inclusion of conjoint/adjunct appointments. If staff that are not on the payroll of assessed institutions are included in the assessment, then there is a large capacity for the system to be rorted. Including performance of those who are not employed by eligible institutions has the potential to dramatically skew the outcomes of the RQF. Hence, ***UNSW is firmly of the belief that to be counted as eligible, an individual must be a member of staff, ie, on the payroll, or have at least 50% of their salary paid by the submitting institution.***

UNSW supports restricting the eligibility to staff at Level Bs and above. The inclusion of some Level A staff could be problematic since it will be difficult to define who should or should not be counted. There are a range of ARC APD equivalents, which are equally as competitive, or even more prestigious than the recognised ARC/NHMRC level A fellows and there is little reason to artificially exclude these if the ARC Fellows are included.

UNSW is firmly of the belief that eligible individuals should be restricted to 0.5FTE or above appointments in order to avoid the pitfalls of New Zealand's Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF), where very low fractional appointments were artificially used to skew performance in some instances.

Similarly, UNSW is firmly of the belief that to be eligible for assessment ***individuals must have been employed by the same submitting institution for more than two years.*** This will prevent the ***"football transfer effect"*** which was so prominent in the United Kingdom's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

¹ The Preferred Model. Minister's Foreword, Page 3.

4. Evidence Portfolio

While the requirements of the Evidence Portfolio are not, as yet, clearly defined, UNSW is concerned that the true quality of an individual's research cannot be fully appreciated with the submission of only 4 outputs. UNSW supports the Go8 recommendation that the RQF adopt both the PBRF and RAE approach whereby individuals provide, in their evidence portfolio, a list of all of their other outputs for the defined period. Only in this way can those that have produced much more high quality research outputs than the four highlighted, be rewarded and appreciated.

5. Assessment Panels

a. Peer Review

UNSW's submission to the *Issues Paper* stated:

"Assessment panels and peer review are important in ensuring that the assessment is done rigorously and to ensure credibility and confidence in the international arena."

UNSW re-affirms its concern that a "minimalist" approach to peer review, as proposed in the *Preferred Model* is not the best approach if we want the RQF exercise to be internationally credible, and if we want to be able to internationally benchmark ourselves against the best research around the world.

The requirement that Assessment Panel memberships comprise:

"at least 50% international experts, primarily international experts who are resident overseas as well as some international experts resident in Australia;..."²

UNSW firmly believes that there should be "real" international peer review in the assessment of quality, and that this should not just be experts with an "international reputation". UNSW supports the idea of bringing international experts into Australia (for each panel) for the assessment period, in much the same way that the PBRF did in New Zealand. ***All "international" experts should be resident overseas.***

The EAG would need to carefully consider potential conflicts of interest in using local international experts.

b. Panel composition

The requirement that Assessment Panel membership comprises:

"At least two experts, as deemed appropriate to the panel structure, who could represent the views of users of the research under assessment."³

UNSW believes that this is a somewhat nebulous statement. There are some disciplines where end-users of research are difficult to define. Discipline-specific variations need to be taken into account and there needs to be full consultation as to what constitutes a "user of research", particularly as it relates to the humanities. For many panels, there is a wide discipline profile and two external users may be insufficient to contribute effectively across a panel's discipline mix.

² The Preferred Model. Section 2.3.2 Composition of RQF Assessment Panels, Page 15.

³ The Preferred Model. Section 2.3.2 Composition of RQF Assessment Panels, Page 15.

c. Panel structure

Some of the proposed panels cover a wide discipline mix and panels should, at least, be able to co-opt other experts to assist in assessing submissions (as has been the case with the RAE). UNSW would strongly urge the EAG to reconsider the proposed RQF assessment panels. Some of the panels either should be broken down into smaller units or informed by sub-panels. There is a clear problem with the wide diversity of the proposed panel covering “Agricultural, veterinary, food and environmental sciences, architecture, urban environment and building”. This Panel should be logically separated into at least two panels:

- Agricultural, veterinary, food and environmental sciences; and
- Architecture, urban environment and building

6. Research outputs for assessment

The Preferred Model states:

“Where individual researchers have produced outputs with other researchers, they will indicate their specific contribution (ie proportion of effort) to achieve the outcome.”⁴

While UNSW supports the notion of proportionally allocating effort in principle, the Guidelines need to carefully consider the efforts of research centres and multi-institutional collaborations, so as not to diminish collaborative efforts.

7. Contextual statements

UNSW unreservedly supports the Go8 comments in relation to the content of the contextual statements. UNSW emphasises that ***the content of the Contextual Statements must be factual, and verifiable***. Notwithstanding this, it must be recognised that international peer review is the best mechanisms for assessing the context statements as the benchmarks will differ from discipline to discipline.

UNSW sees the context statements containing (but not limited to) the following types of outputs:

- Measures of esteem
- Citation/impact factors
- Grants awarded and value of grants
- Prizes/awards
- Extent to which the group has an acceptable “critical mass” of researchers to facilitate international-standard research
- Attraction, retention and completion of research students
- Patents, and other technology transfer outputs

These types of outputs are easily verifiable, objective and apply across a range of disciplines. In addition, they can be benchmarked nationally and internationally.

The context statements should not include subjective material, which is not easily verifiable. This means that claims against strategic plans, and statements by end-users, do not add to the assessment of research excellence. The format of the Context Statements should be prescriptive and well defined and should avoid lengthy narratives.

⁴ The Preferred Model. Section 2.4 Research outputs for assessment, Page 15.

8. The RQF rating scales

UNSW supports the proposed rating scale, and believes that the *Preferred Model* has found a good balance between “Quality” and “Impact”. UNSW supports the Go8 proposal that an additional rating be included for those that have been rated (without adjustments) “High Quality” and “High Impact”.

9. Guidelines

UNSW notes that the RQF Oversight Committee approves the eligibility guidelines, the guidelines for Assessment and Assessors, the discipline-specific criteria, assessment weightings and the moderation and validation mechanisms.⁵

UNSW further notes that:

“The development of the guidelines will require wide-ranging consultations with relevant stakeholders to ensure that appropriate consideration is given to the breadth of disciplines to be addressed.”⁶

UNSW stresses that there must be full consultation with the whole sector in formulating the guidelines, and not just with “relevant stakeholders”. UNSW appreciates that the Guidelines must be developed in a timely manner, but would ask that sufficient time be given to the sector for the development of what will be the defining component of the RQF – the Guidelines.

Additional issues which the Guidelines should consider include:

- What happens to individuals who come and go within the collection period? and
- What happens to staff who research across clearly different disciplines?
- Can staff be counted in more than one group, or do they have to nominate in only one?

10. Summary

UNSW strongly recommends that the RQF exercise not be stripped down as a “light RQF” which might compromise credibility and international benchmarking.

UNSW would prefer to see peer review as a fundamental platform for the assessment of research quality and impact, and a significant proportion of real international assessment as a major component of the exercise.

The RQF must be careful to avoid unintended collateral consequences. There is no question that the funding impact of the RQF is sufficiently strong to drive behaviour across the sector. The Model must ensure that the behaviour it drives is positive.

Clearly this is a high level discussion paper and the development of detailed guidelines is crucial to the model receiving support from the sector.



Professor Les Field
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)

⁵ The Preferred Model. Figure 2 – The Preferred RQF Model, Page 11.

⁶ The Preferred Model. Section 2.9 Developing the RQF guidelines, Page 19.