

Trends and challenges in research assessment



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Structure

- Trends in research evaluation– direction of travel
 - The wider context of research governance
 - Research evaluation
 - Assessment processes and techniques
 - Problematic trends?
- Role of peer review
- Dilemmas in peer review: the pursuit of quality and impact

Direction of travel

1. Wider context of research governance
 - *Transparency and accountability*
 - *Performance-based* allocation of research funds and externally defined indicators
 - Negotiating levels of *trust*

Individual level:

impacts of UK RAE on researchers' work and careers

Positive

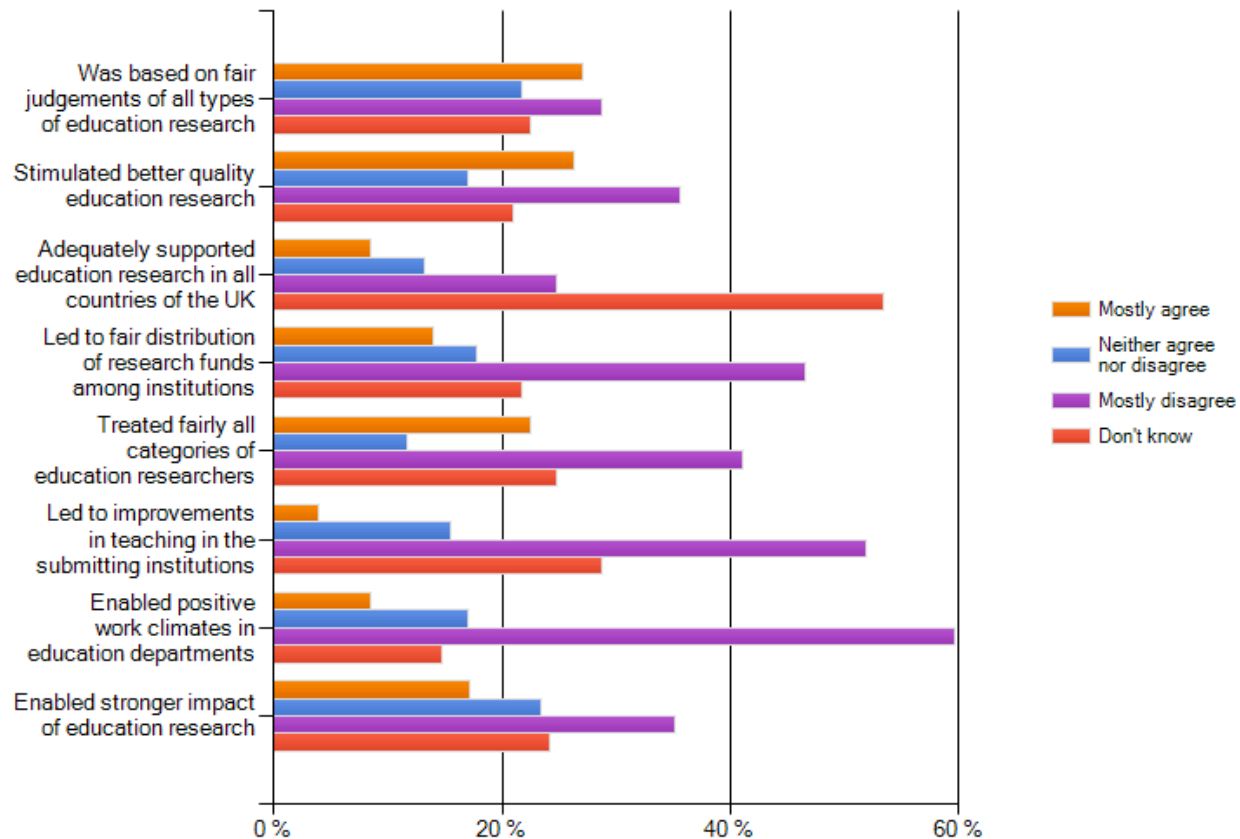
- ❑ Quality of publications/ of research
- ❑ Sense of belonging to a strong research culture with recognition of research activity
- ❑ Motivation, confidence, identity
- ❑ Engagement in impact activity
- ❑ Publications productivity
- ❑ Employment (e.g. promotion, workload of staff designated as research active)

Negative

- ❑ Quality and recognition of teaching, service and administration
- ❑ Struggling to develop in a climate of high pressure and divisiveness
- ❑ Individual staff morale, particularly in the case of staff not entered in the RAE
- ❑ Focus and breadth of research publications and of research projects
- ❑ Career development and equal opportunities

Review advice vs. decision – mixed response

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Across the HE system the RAE 2008:



Direction of travel

2. Research evaluation

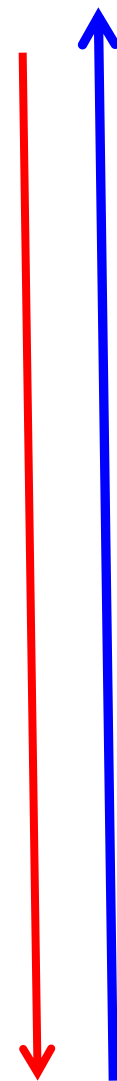
- *Formalisation* of research evaluation
- *Stratification* of research evaluation
- *Specialisation* of research assessment

System level:

stratification and specialization of research evaluation

Expertise

<i>Level</i>	<i>Scope</i>	<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Evaluator</i>	<i>Strategies & procedures</i>
Macro	international, national, multidisciplinary and disciplinary	policy and strategic decisions; resource allocation; field identity and status	international organisations, professional associations, funding bodies	econometrics, bibliometrics, expert descriptions, scenarios, peer review systems, consensus conferences, consultation, public debate
Mezo	organisations, research units, programmes	allocation of funds within organisations; management decisions; human resources decisions; organisational identity, competitiveness and prestige	national strategic bodies; funding bodies; quality assurance and audit bodies; professional evaluators; management; external evaluators; public; media	rating; peer review; bibliometrics; econometrics; international standards; accreditation; impact and use studies; benchmarking; quality management; advisory boards; case studies
Micro	teams, individuals, projects, outputs, and outcomes	access to funds; publication; career and professional status; awards and recognition; decisions on: implementation, follow-up, dissemination, reviewing etc.	peers; human resources departments; management bodies; professional associations; grant awarding bodies; editors and referees; users and partners; public, media	peer review; human resources management; case studies; public debates



Involvement

Direction of travel

3. Assessment processes and techniques

- Peer review and metrics *niches*
- *Criteria and indicators mismatch*
- *De-sensitisation*

Peer review and metrics niches

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Micro	teams, individuals, projects, outputs, and outcomes	access to funds; publication; career and professional status; awards and recognition; decisions on: implementation, follow-up, dissemination, reviewing etc.	peers; human resources departments; management bodies; professional associations; grant awarding bodies; editors and referees; users and partners; public, media	peer review; human resources management procedures; case studies; public recognition and esteem indicators

Criteria and indicators mismatch

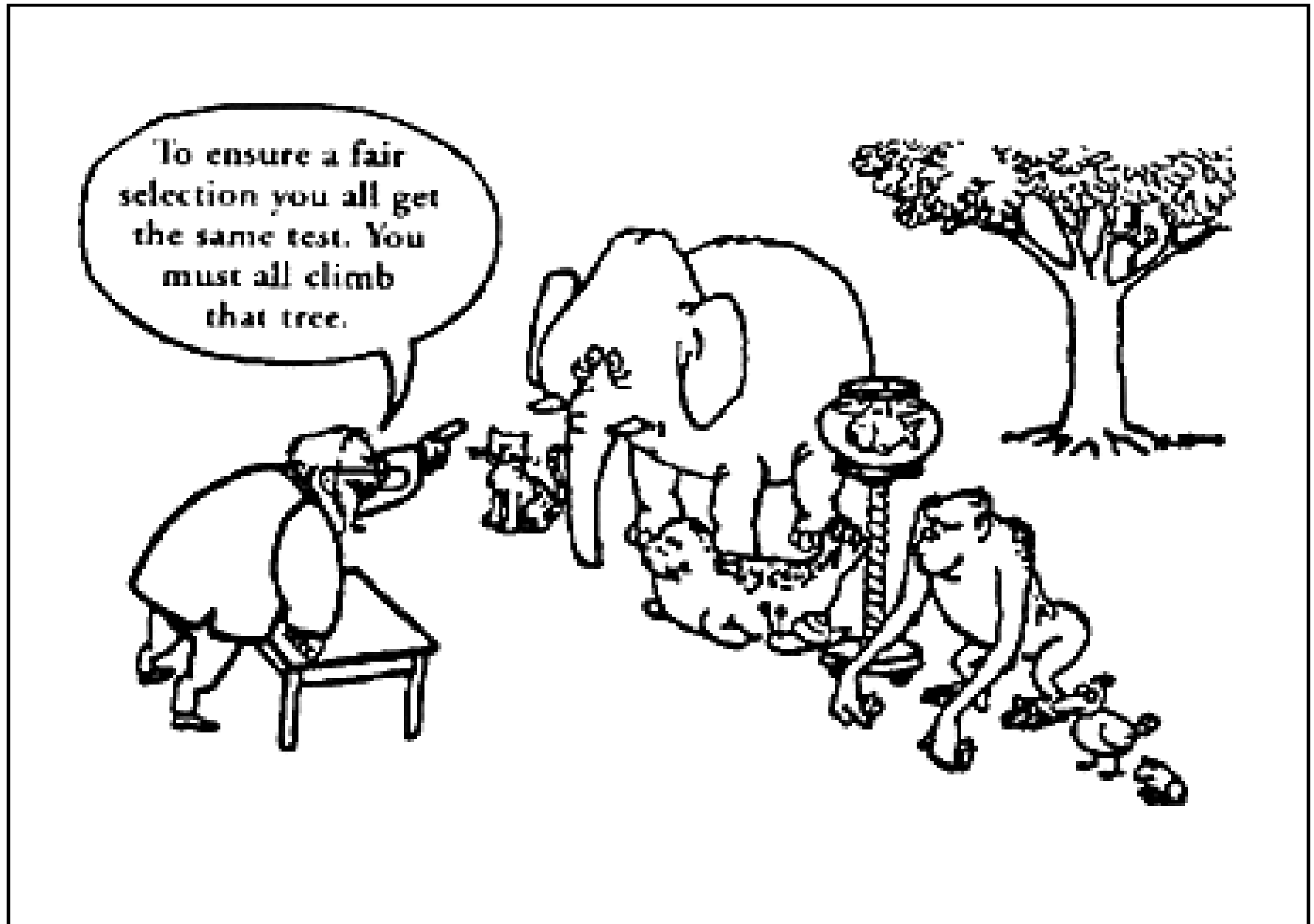
Why do researchers do research (the “Impact” study, 2010)?

- ❑ Contribute to disciplinary knowledge
- ❑ Contribute to the wider world
- ❑ Exercising social responsibility
- ❑ Career progression

What kinds of messages do research assessment arrangements send to researchers?

- ❑ Productivity
- ❑ Technical robustness
- ❑ Fitness for purpose
- ❑ Value for money

De-sensitisation



Applied research grant proposals (from Oancea, 2009)

1. **Academic robustness**
2. **Timeliness and potential to achieve positive short or medium-term impact** in relation to evidenced needs
- 3 **Educational usefulness**
- 4 **Resonance**
- 5 **Engagement** of partners from different sites
- 6 **Relevance to the remit of the funder** (priorities and activities)
- 7 **Locality:** direct relevance to local and regional needs
- 8 **Sustainability** of developmental work undertaken once funding has ended; horizon scanning/ “futurizing”
- 9 **Distinctiveness:** innovative, original; anticipated contribution
- 10 **Ability/ expertise** of the researchers
- 11 **Anticipated professional development benefits**
- 12 **Institutional support** for the work
- 13 **Feasibility**
- 14 **Evaluation:** monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes and impact
- 15 **Value for money**
- 16 **Presentation** of the application: specific, readable, brief, clear, complete

Criteria for journal publication

1. **Relevance:**
 - relevance to the aims and scope of journal
 - topicality/ timeliness in relation to the field of research and to practice
2. **Significant and original contribution :**
 - subject matter worthy of investigation and appropriately covered
 - novelty of substantive ideas, information, problems, interpretation
 - originality in relation to existent related research (approach/paradigm, techniques, theoretical or conceptual framework, use of evidence: “scientific originality”)
 - promise (ideas that are likely to stimulate further research and development)
 - contribution to research and to practice (education, training, staff development, policy)
3. **Accessibility and clarity:**
 - “acceptable and sensible level of accessibility given the nature of the material under discussion” and the readership of the journal readership
 - clear presentation throughout
4. **High standards of scholarship in argument and interpretation:**
 - good underlying theoretical framework
 - satisfactory structure and logical organisation
 - clear statement of purpose, conceptual rationale, research questions and hypotheses
 - literature review engaging with an adequately rich background of theory and research
 - adequate analysis, discussion and critical review of the work, its results and findings, their implications and significance, any limitations, and potential for future research
 - alternative interpretations taken into account;
 - conclusions and claims supported by data
5. **Sound methodological basis:**
 - quality of research design, appropriateness of methodology, and technical quality
 - awareness of work that is methodologically related
 - clear description of data, including accurate tables and figures
 - quality and appropriateness of analyses (statistical and qualitative)
 - sufficient investment in evaluating the consequences of interventions
 - careful evaluation of strengths and limitations
6. **Ethics:**
 - following appropriate ethical guidelines
 - honesty in reporting (e.g. work in progress, unsuccessful research, opinion/speculative pieces)
7. **Adequate presentation, style, and language:**
 - standard of English, readability
 - style (compliance with guidelines; non-discriminatory writing; good use of tables and figures)
 - paratext: honest, descriptive, helpful, and tempting title; concise, clear and helpful abstract
 - reasonable length

Criteria fed into the assessment of monograph proposals

1. **Balance of contents and coverage**
2. **Convincing rationale and originality:** worthwhile aims, novel/ innovative approach, topicality and relevance, importance (unique features, gap in information, better approach than the competition, pushing forward the boundaries of a discipline)
3. **Logical structure, thematic coherence, and effective organisation**
4. **Overall academic standard**
5. **Quality of writing** of sample chapters, including accessibility to intended audience
6. **Evidence of appropriate readership and market need:** potential market (main subsidiary, including educational market and international), discipline and level of intended readers, advantages to intended readers (above what is currently available), size of markets, ease of reaching markets, reasons for buying the book, anticipated sales
7. **Advantages over competition:** comparative strengths and weaknesses of competing titles, how the proposed book will improve upon existing books and resources on the market
8. **Suitability of author:** publication record, evidence of esteem, translated works, other writing projects of prospective author(s)
9. **Peer endorsements:** commendations (included in the proposal) by other scholars
10. **Realistic timetable and feasibility:** appropriate length, realistic writing arrangements and proposed completion date, sustainable proposed print run, adequate plans for graphics, compatibility of software intended for use, plans for updates (if appropriate)
11. **Financial soundness:** likely production costs, adequate proposed price, overall financial soundness of project
12. **Concision and clarity of proposal**

Blunt instruments... but an
advantage of peer review?

The pursuit of quality (and impact...)

Governing peer review/ doing peer review

- external tensions - stakeholder groups
- internal tensions - the profession of researcher

DILEMMAS

What idea of “good research” underpins peer review?

- **quality (and usefulness) as “stable” and measurable attributes**

- Discovering quality

VS.

- **quality as “form of public judgement”**
(agreement about the conformity between standards and norms and particular practices and outputs)

- Constructing quality

How is “good research” to be captured in peer review processes and systems?

□ **constructing and testing proxies of quality, together with appropriate thresholds and measures**

- Rigorous testing of indicators and correlation calculations

VS.

□ **nurturing critical deliberation about research and its standards of quality**

- Careful development of conceptual frameworks, under constant revision

How is “good research” to be nurtured through peer review?

- supporting **better performance in public assessments**
 - Technical value of indicators
- cultivating **intrinsic excellence and integrity in research** and “virtuous synergies” with policy and practice
 - Developmental value of criteria
 - Reviewer feedback



