



Response to the RQF consultation paper  
*The preferred model*

October 2005

## Introduction

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Expert Advisory Group's consultation paper, *Research Quality Framework: Assessing the quality and impact of research in Australia. The Preferred Model* (EAG 2005) (hereafter: 'the consultation paper').

AARE has over individual 1300 members from all parts of Australia and many overseas countries. The majority of members are university academics, but there are also school and VET teachers; officers of teacher organisations, school authorities and education departments; and other educational researchers and users of educational research. AARE has an active postgraduate and early career researcher membership. Thus the positions taken in this response to the consultation paper reflect the views and expertise of this diverse membership.

The numbering of the following sections mirrors the numbering in the consultation paper. Most of the matters raised in the consultation paper are responded to.

### 1.2 Contexts

AARE broadly agrees with the EAG positions in section 1.2 (definitions of quality and impact, scope of RQF, definition of research, underlying principles and link to 'third stream' activities).

### 2.1 Eligibility for assessment in the RQF

**Implications of involvement of particular proportions of research-active staff.** AARE broadly agrees with research groups (as described) being the unit of assessment. However, explicit consideration should be given to the pros and cons of the *proportion* of all research active staff that institutions would be expected to nominate as part of research groupings, and other matters related to the criteria for nomination.

For example, consideration may need to be given to avoiding (or ameliorating) the perverse incentive for universities to direct resources to a limited number of researchers/teams for the purpose of gaining optimal RQF scores at the expense of the overall quality of research carried out within the institution. While it may be appropriate in some instances to increase the concentration of research resources, this will not always be the case, and any such concentration should be done on its merits in terms of improving the quality of research (etc), not for the sole purpose of optimising RQF scores.

Similarly, consideration may need to be given to avoiding (or ameliorating) the unfairness and sub-optimal allocation of funds resulting from different levels of research concentration within different universities which have overall equivalent research outputs. That is, a university that has a relatively small number of researchers producing a given level of research output (of given quality and impact) should not be advantaged over another university where equivalent research output is achieved by a wider spread of staff (which might include excellent world-class teams). The latter pattern may have benefits in (a) the quality of teaching where more researchers are significantly involved in course development and direct relations with students, (b) better ensuring the future research capacity of Australian higher education through a period of significant generational change because the research activity of more early/mid-career (under 45, say) staff is supported, and (c) meeting very diverse community needs for research – concentration of research activity may result in elimination of research in areas of importance to particular communities, industries or regions.

## 2.2 Evidence portfolios for assessment

**Context statements.** We broadly support the proposal for evidence portfolios and for the provision of ‘context statements’ by universities. These statements could also include, where appropriate, statements about the impact of the research on university teaching (for example, undergraduate and graduate course curriculum, mentoring of coursework as well as research students), and on developing the future capacity of the institution (or faculty or research grouping). Such matters cover aspects of both ‘quality’ and ‘impact’ as defined in the consultation paper.

## 2.3 RQF assessment panels

**Oversighting Committee responsibilities.** We agree with the establishment of the RQF Oversighting Committee which will develop guidelines and instructions for the operation of the panels.

We believe that the Oversighting Committee should also have a broader responsibility of on-going monitoring of the ‘externalities’ of the operation of the RQF. The encouragement of positive behaviours has been emphasised as a benefit of the introduction of the RQF (*Issues Paper*, p. 14). There is also the possibility that negative behaviours may occur as a consequence of the operation of the RQF and the particular ways in which researchers and institutions interact with it. In our response to the *Issues paper* (AARE 2005) AARE outlined a number of additional possible positive behaviours and some possible negative behaviours that the operation of an RQF could encourage. There must be a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating such externalities – we cannot just trust to wishful thinking. The Oversighting Committee may be best placed for monitoring, though there should also be a periodic thorough and independent assessment of the unintended, as well as intended, effects of the RQF.

### 2.3.1 Number of panels

**Discipline composition of panel 9** On the whole, we are comfortable with the positioning of education along with the other disciplines listed in assessment panel 9 (p. 14). However, we wish to make several observations about the composition of this panel (in relation to the others).

We note that discussion of the composition of the panels is silent on the disciplinary coherence of these panels. While the composition of some panels may appear self-evident, it is not so for the ‘Social sciences, law, education, politics, sociology and indigenous studies’ panel (panel 9).

In comparison with other panels, this panel is extraordinarily large in the number of disciplines it will assess. We suggest that the depth and breadth of the coverage expected of this panel requires rethinking the panel constructions (as outlined on p. 13). Rather than constructing extra panels, it may be possible to establish sub-panels for panel 9 (to account for its disciplinary diversity and administrative workload), as is the practice in the RAE in the United Kingdom, utilising similar mechanisms for aggregating up from sub-panels. We also suggest that, if the number of disciplines in the panel (composed of 2 or 3 sub-panels) remains the same, then the EAG should consider enlarging the number of its members beyond 15 (to 18-20).

In considering the nature of the discipline of education AARE sees great value in the analysis recently presented by Professor Geoff Whitty (Director of the Institute of Education, London University, and President of the British Educational Research Association), in his BERA presidential address (17 September, 2005). Whitty describes ‘education-al research’ (specifically geared at improving education) *as part of* the whole field of ‘education research’ (which includes basic research *on* education and contributing to social theory). AARE takes a similar view, positioning education-al

research as part of the broader field of education research. This is quite different from the view expressed by the New Zealand PBRF Education Peer Review Panel which sees education's 'bifurcation into what may broadly be described as theory-based "education studies" and practice-focused "teacher education"' (Alcorn et al 2004, p. 284). As well as having little relationship to the reality of education research and knowledge, this New Zealand position denies the contributions to 'theory' of much 'practice-based' research, and has a very limited view of educational practice in that it excludes the gamut of educational policy/practice matters that are not part of 'teaching practice'.

### 2.3.2 Composition of panels

**Overseas residency and English-speaking should not have inappropriate priority** The EAG notes its preference for international experts residing overseas (p. 15). AARE believes that care needs to be taken to ensure that 'overseas' is not foregrounded at the expense of 'international', and that preference needs to be given to the latter at any point where there is potential conflict between the two. This will particularly be the case where Australia is a world leader or where the research topics (broadly defined) are unique to Australia. Similarly, care needs to be taken to ensure that 'overseas' is not interpreted simply as 'English-speaking' and 'international' simply as recognition within English-speaking nations. Again, the emphasis needs to be on, and informed by, a more comprehensive understanding of 'international'.

**AARE nomination role** We suggest that AARE could play a role in nominating international experts in education research who are resident overseas as well as experts resident within Australia (consistent with mechanisms for recruiting panel members such as those set out on p. 15).

## 2.4 Research outputs for assessment

**Need for differential/flexible guidelines within panels** We agree with the EAG's view that 'the nature and type of research outputs will typically differ according to discipline areas' (p. 15). However, as we noted above, there is great diversity within the panel in which education is located, and there is diversity within education itself. Therefore, it would be appropriate to have flexibility of guidelines application (or differential guidelines as appropriate) *within* panels, as well as guidelines that differ between panels. We note there will be further consultation on this matter.

**Problem of very long timelines.** The timelines for RQF cycles set out in the document may be administratively convenient, but they point to an inherent problem with the general conception of the RQF as a mechanism for allocating funds. This problem may be unavoidable, but it must be recognised; and it must be monitored and ameliorated where possible. The problem is the very long period (up to twelve years) between the date of research production (publication, say - which itself might be a year or so after the research was actually carried out), and consequent allocation of funds. For example, research produced in 2004 may be included in the 2010 assessment cycle, which will determine funding until the following assessment in 2016 is complete and funds resulting from it are allocated to institutions and thence to faculties or research groups. Twelve years is a very long time in any university sector, but will be especially so in the circumstances in Australia over the coming decade when a massive wave of retirements will occur (see Table 1) in addition to what will probably be increasing mobility of academics throughout their careers. Thus the researchers, research teams and nature and quality of research in particular institutions will be very different when funds reach institutions compared with what they were when the original research used in the assessment was carried out. This difference is unlikely to be random (or fairly uniform), but will differ in degree and nature according to different types of institutions and different disciplines. For example, as we noted in our response to the *Issues Paper* (p. 4) many of the universities that are currently less research intensive overall (even if they have some research intensive faculties or research groups) largely

because of their origins in the CAE sector, will have almost none of the CAE-era staff remaining within five years or so, and may well have a new cohort of young academics with excellent research capability. The operation of the RQF should not undermine positive research-related developments in such institutions.

**Table 1. Australian academic staff\*, 1997 and 2004**

	Lecturer B and above		All academic staff	
	1997	2004	1997	2004
Percentage aged 50 and over	33.9%	45.1%	28.8%	33.6%
Percentage aged 45 and over	52.0%	63.5%	44.9%	49.2%
Percentage aged 35 to 44	40.7%	28.3%	40.2%	34.9%
Percentage aged under 35	7.3%	8.2%	14.9%	15.9%

\* Includes 'research only' staff, who are generally younger than "teaching" and 'teaching and research' staff. See table in Box 1 for data excluding 'research only'.

Source: DETYA 1997, *Selected Higher Education Statistics: Staff Statistics, 1997, Table 14.*

DEST 2005, *Staff 2004: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Table 20.* [http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/EC48C875-7617-4817-8849-BAEE97664471/2457/2004\\_staff.xls#Tbl20!A1](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/EC48C875-7617-4817-8849-BAEE97664471/2457/2004_staff.xls#Tbl20!A1)

## 2.5 Context statements and validation information

We commented about 'context statements' above (under 2.2).

We agree that 'different procedures or different types of evidence are seen as necessary to assess research quality and impact in different disciplines' (p. 16) (and, we would add, *within* complex disciplines such as education). This principle must be applied to both quality and impact.

**Importance of equity of impact assessments** The EAG's position that research impact should be 'verifiable' and 'demonstrable', while understandable, should take account of the reality of impact - especially in social arenas such as education. Evidence of 'prospective and potential' impact, including of 'mechanisms and structures designed to increase the likelihood of impact' may be valuable *indicators* of impact where verifiable and demonstrable evidence of actual impact is inherently difficult if not impossible – even where significant impact almost certainly has occurred. Thorough case studies reported in *The Impact of Educational Research* (DETYA 2000) demonstrated the complex, non-linear ways in which educational research has had a profound impact on many particular aspects of educational policy and practice. The impact is often not apparent for some years, and can only be ascertained through conscientious tracings through, for example, professional development course content, professional journals, conference presentations, submissions and policy documents, and so on. The original source in a formal research 'product' often has long ceased to be cited by the time the actual policy and practice is influenced. To assess impact in such cases requires informed judgements of those familiar with particular routes between research 'products' (as may be assessed through the RQF process) and impact. This is not easy, but it is essential if there is to be equity of treatment between disciplines such as education (and others) and those disciplines where impact can be quite simply traced and verified, for example, from original research 'product' through formal intellectual property recognition (patent registration and subsequent licensing, etc) to product development, manufacture and sale.

There are other complications in assessing impact in social fields. The ideologies or biases of potential users play a greater role in social fields than in, for example, physical sciences, engineering

and product manufacturing. In the social fields, research of the highest quality and most profound long term effect may be unacceptable to potential users for some time, and research of poor quality may be very popular with potential users because it suits their current biases.

We discuss implications of this further in the following sections.

### **2.6.1 RQF rating scales: research quality**

We agree with the separate criterion referenced ratings for research ‘quality’ and research ‘impact’. We note that impact on the academic/research field is incorporated in quality. In principle we agree with that, though it is important to recognise that substantial research occurs outside universities (and outside PFRAs and recognised research centres/units/laboratories in government and nongovernment agencies and corporations). There is often no clear differentiation between what can be considered a research ‘product’ for RQF purposes and a publication or conference presentation incorporating research outcomes and scholarship in a non-academic context – and no clear differentiation between the scholarship and research leading to then. Is impact on such non-academic work to be considered in assessing ‘quality’ or in assessing ‘impact’? This is not a simple question if all disciplines are to be treated equitably. Those disciplines with extensive research communities beyond universities (and other formal research enterprises) and where the boundaries are blurred between research and practice (such as high level, inquiry-based professional practice) should not be disadvantaged by having influence on that wider community classified as external ‘impact’ where parallel influence in disciplines with a more tightly defined research community/arena is classified as an indicator of ‘quality’.

Two matters regarding terminology: First, there may be confusion in the use of ‘impact’ (as academic impact) as part of ‘quality’, and (external) ‘impact’. We therefore suggest that instead of ‘academic impact’ that a term such as ‘academic significance’ be used (as in the UK’s RAE). Second, the notion of ‘international excellence’ should be so defined that an area of research that is concerned with uniquely Australian matters or where there is little quality or quantity of research outside Australia is not disadvantaged relative to research in areas that are clearly global. For example, research in Australian Indigenous studies should not be disadvantaged relative to research in pure mathematics. And, as we noted above, ‘international’ should not be confined to the dominant English-speaking regions of the world – what defines ‘the international academic community’ is (and should be) always open to contest.

### **2.6.2 RQF rating scales: research impact**

We agree that assessment of impact is difficult, and support the tentativeness in this section. However, we note that the proposal is effectively for only two (not three) points on the impact scale because ‘limited’ and ‘moderate’ ratings have identical ‘adjusted score’ outcomes (2.6.3).

### **2.6.3 Aggregations of research quality and impact ratings**

We agree that if research is assessed as very low quality, even high impact should not increase its overall adjusted score (see our comments above regarding impact). However, we cannot understand why high quality research with high impact should receive no higher score than high quality research with no impact at all (or limited impact). The logic of this is an incentive for researchers who are reasonably confident that a quality rating of 5 is within their reach to put all their effort into meeting research quality criteria and none into impact criteria. Thus score-optimising dissemination strategies

would exclusively target the international academic community, ignoring potential external users – thus militating against any wider ‘social benefit’ of the research.

#### **2.6.4 Validation of RQF ratings**

We agree that panels should have access to experts in addition to those on a panel. However, the characteristics of those experts should be appropriate to the aspects of the research outputs requiring additional assessment, and not be predetermined (‘international professional standing’) – for example, the person best able to assess a matter of impact may be someone of specific local expertise and understandings. Similarly for expert assessors involved in validation.

### **2.7 Reporting from the RQF**

The ‘additional reporting’ and ‘aggregation’ should not disadvantage (exclude or misrepresent) cross- or multi-disciplinary research relative to that research which can be easily classified by discipline.

#### **2.8.1 The RQF and research training**

We certainly agree that further work needs to be done in (a) determining the quality of research training, and (b) determining the most appropriate criteria for allocating RTS funds. We raised a number of issues in our response to the *Issues Paper*, which are common to other disciplines where experienced, senior professional practitioners make up a high proportion (even a large majority) of HDR students. Completion rates do not necessarily play the same role as an indicator of quality as they do for younger HDR students at the beginning of their careers and for whom the credential (and not just what is learned and produced during the degree program) is of vital importance. Also, while a high quality research culture in the institution is important for a quality HDR program for such students, so too may be the institution’s collaborative relationship with the HDR students’ work environments in areas such as teaching (initial and continuing professional education), consultancies, and community service as well as formal research projects.

#### **2.8.2 The RQF outcomes and block/performance funding**

We note the EAG agreed position that: ‘Funding allocated to institutions on the basis of the RQF should take the form of block grants for which institutions have discretion to determine their internal distribution’ (p. 9).

We also note the statement that

without robust data to undertake financial modelling, the EAG cannot recommend at this stage any particular formula for distributing research resources using the RQF outcomes. There will need to be specific consultation on this aspect of implementing the RQF once the preferred RQF model has been agreed. Consideration will be given to the implications of the redistribution of any existing research funding and associated transition arrangements. (p. 19)

We accept that it is too early in the process to recommend any particular formula. However, the essential principles of distribution have been widely canvassed in the public arena, yet have not been included formally in the RQF development process. We believe that they should be dispassionately evaluated, rather than having the positions of those with the best access to media and other forums prevail. There is no reason why the broad principles or structures of funding allocations should not be considered in the RQF development process at this stage (or the next). Agreement about such principles (or, at least, an understanding of alternatives) would be a useful prerequisite to selection

and analysis of relevant data, financial modelling, and the development and testing of formulae for ‘distributing research resources’.

The macro principle of allocation would indicate the relativity to actual research volume (weighted for quality) of the funding allocated to the universities with the highest and lowest RQF scores. This could be *proportional* to actual weighted research volume (more or less the current system), or it could *compress* the ratio and give more to the currently less research intensive (to support their improvement to a particular standard, say), or it could *expand* the ratio, allocating more than proportionate funds to the already most research intensive, and less to the less research intensive. There would be a continuum of possible positions, from that where all RQF-allocated funds go to the one top scoring university, and the rest get none, to the other extreme of all funds going to the lowest scoring institution.

There has been advocacy to expand the ratio – to move further along the continuum towards the end where only the top scoring university is allocated funds. For example, Michael Gallagher of ANU has argued that, ‘without a serious concentration of investment in the peaks of national research performance, Australia risks losing its capacity to continue to participate in and contribute to the great intellectual advances of the twenty first century’ (Gallagher 2005, p. 10) – even though, as he points out (p. 8), there is already a high level of concentration (for example, Go8 universities account for 70 per cent of all research income). This is not the place to discuss the complex analysis of options Gallagher provides, but only to argue for the matter to be more explicitly on the RQF agenda, and for those with concerns and understandings associated with matters vital to Australia’s future other than the internationally ‘great intellectual advances of the twenty first century’ to assert their voice in the debate. Australian education research is of very high international standing (see Box 1), and AARE is proud of the part it has played over the decades in developing and enhancing the quality and impact of Australian educational research. However, we appreciate that there is much more that is, and should be, valuable in education research than international standing and leading great intellectual advances. It is also important to recognise that in many areas of research the greatest strengths and innovation lie with researchers who are not in ‘research intensive’ universities – and this is not a random matter. Box 1, an excerpt from the AARE response to the *Issues Paper*, sets out some of the sorts of matters that need to be taken into account when determining the macro structure of block allocations.

## 2.9 Developing RQF Guidelines

We agree that ‘wide-ranging consultations with relevant stakeholders’ will be necessary to ensure the development of effective and appropriate guidelines.

**Box 1. Arguments against the allocation of *substantially reduced* funding to institutions with relatively low RQF scores** (edited excerpt from AARE Response to the RQF *Issues Paper*, pp. 4-5).

**First**, there may be very strong research teams or research faculties/disciplines within an overall less research active institution. It would be inequitable as well as inefficient if they were denied support or recognition solely because of their institutional location.

Education provides an example. Australian educational research has very high international standing – according to research by Phelan, Anderson & Bourke, over the period 1987-98

Australia's share of international *publications* is greater in education than for any other major field in this country except for the earth sciences... Australia's share of international *citations* is greater for education than for all other major fields except for the earth sciences and the agricultural sciences. (DETYA 2000, p. 579 - emphasis in original).

Yet, a high proportion of education academic staff are located (and educational research occurs) in universities that would be considered 'less research intensive' - not sandstones, aspirant research universities, or ATNs, to use Simon Marginson's categories (Marginson 2005, Table 3, p. 9). According to DEST data for 2004, 33 per cent of education academic organisational unit (AOU) 'teaching & teaching and research' staff are in those institutions, but only 18 per cent of 'teaching & teaching and research' staff in all AOU's, and only 8 per cent of all 'research only' staff are in those institutions.

While it is unlikely that any RQF implementation will limit access to national competitive grants for researchers (and their faculties) in such institutions, their access to infrastructural support (broadly defined), postgraduate student enrolments, public esteem, etc should also not be limited because of institutional location.

**Second**, the impact on particular professions or fields/disciplines or communities must be considered.

Through the accident of history the education of many beginning professionals in teaching and some other occupations (and the large part of education in some fields not related to a specific profession) occurs in new universities that may not be considered 'research intensive'. It may be damaging to Australian society, economy and culture (as well as being inequitable) if these professions and fields do not have the research support that is given to those professions and fields that, through parallel accidents of history, are associated with universities that would be classified as 'research intensive'. This is a very important principle if 'impact' as social benefit is to be taken seriously.

Research of most relevance to (and involving as collaborating participants) Indigenous Australians, rural and remote Australians and those in the more disadvantaged urban communities also tends to be disproportionately carried out in institutions that may be considered 'less research intensive'. It is important that the capacity and capability for this research is not constrained by categorisations of the institutions in which it may occur.

**Third**, given the relatively recent creation of a number of universities from former CAEs, and the dramatic generational change in academic staff that will be occurring in most of them over the coming decade (Hugo forthcoming), it is crucial that the current (past and near future) degree of research intensity does not limit the future and simply become a self-fulfilling prophecy - preventing highly capable and motivated new staff from doing the research they would otherwise do because their institution is not given the resources because it is classified as a 'less research intensive institution'.

This generational change is a very important issue for education in the university sector as a whole. According to DEST data, in 2004 60 per cent of staff in the education AOU were aged 50 or over, while only 45 per cent of all staff were aged 50 or over. Males are generally much older than females, as the following table indicates.

**Percentage of teaching and teaching & research staff aged 50 and over, Education and all AOU's**

	Males	Females	Total
Education AOU	70%	54%	60%
All AOU's	49%	38%	45%

Source: DEST custom tables. FTE of all full time and fractional full time teaching and teaching & research academic staff. Excludes 'research only' staff – see Table 1 for data that includes 'research only' staff.

**References**

Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) 2000, *The Impact of Educational Research*, Research Evaluation Programme, Higher Education Division, DETYA, Canberra.

Hugo, Graeme forthcoming, 'Demographic trends in Australia's academic workforce', *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*.

Marginson, Simon 2005, 'Universities: potentials created by the Nelson reforms', a paper presented at the *Sustaining Prosperity: New reform Opportunities for Australia* conference, The Melbourne Institute/*The Australian*, Melbourne, 1 April.

## References

- Alcorn, N., et al. 2004, 'Enhancing Education Research in New Zealand: Experiences and Recommendations from the PBRF Education Peer Review Panel', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 39(2), pp. 275-302
- Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) 2005, *Research Quality Framework: Response to the Issues Paper*, submission number RQF010053, <http://www.aare.edu.au/exec/rqf.pdf>
- Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) 2000, *The Impact of Educational Research*, Research Evaluation Programme, Higher Education Division, DETYA, Canberra.
- Expert Advisory Group (EAG) 2005, *Research Quality Framework: Assessing the quality and impact of research in Australia. The Preferred Model*, [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research\\_sector/policies\\_issues\\_reviews/key\\_issues/research\\_quality\\_framework/rqf\\_preferred\\_model.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/research_quality_framework/rqf_preferred_model.htm)
- Gallagher, Michael 2005, 'Directions in Australian Higher Education and Research – Investment for Differentiation?' Keynote address to the National University Finance and Procurement Conference, Macquarie Graduate School of Management, 5 July
- Hugo, Graeme forthcoming, 'Demographic trends in Australia's academic workforce', *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*.
- Marginson, Simon 2005, 'Universities: potentials created by the Nelson reforms', a paper presented at the *Sustaining Prosperity: New reform Opportunities for Australia* conference, The Melbourne Institute/*The Australian*, Melbourne, 1 April.