

Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment – Invitation to Contribute

A response from the Publishers Association

1. The Publishers Association (PA) has been invited by the joint funding bodies to contribute to the review of research assessment in higher education.
2. Through the Council of Academic and Professional Publishers (CAPP), the PA represents the majority of commercial academic and professional publishers based in the UK. We have consulted the CAPP membership on the invitation to contribute and the paper offered as a basis for discussion. As a result we wish to put forward the following comments.
3. If it would assist the research assessment, CAPP can offer to convene a working group of publishers experienced in these matters to work further with the steering group at a later stage in the review process.
4. While it might be thought that the increased pressure on academics to publish as a result of the RAE has been a boon to the publishing industry, in reality it has had a number of perverse unintended effects on the type, timing and quality of proposals and manuscripts submitted to publishers. There has also been a marked increase in pressure on the editorial boards and journal staff that support the peer-review system, and a discrimination against certain journals because of their impact factor weighting.
5. We are aware of the prominence given to ISI JCR impact factors as bibliometric measures within the algorithm approach to assessment of research quality. As a contribution to the scholarly debate over the value of such factors as a direct measure of quality we offer the attached paper *Impact Factors: Use and Abuse* by our colleagues Mayur Amin and Michael Mabe at Elsevier Science from the occasional newsletter *Perspectives in Publishing*. Any further discussion regarding the content of this paper should be conducted directly with the authors themselves. Their contact details are in the paper.

Format

6. Whilst the weight that journal articles give to RAE submission compared with books, book chapters and other 'outputs' is supposed to depend on the discipline and the views of the panel conducting the assessment, there seems to be a general view that publishing journal articles is the most effective way of getting a good rating in the RAE. The pressure to chalk up frequent publications (and the increased general pressures of academic life) is more conducive to journal papers, narrow research monographs, collections of essays and conference volumes than to major works of scholarship and synthesis, which generally require a longer gestation period. As a result, a larger proportion of the most ambitiously broad ranging and potentially influential major academic works now seem to originate in the USA or continental Europe.
7. We were very pleased that the above problem was explicitly taken on board by HEFCE in the guidelines for the last RAE, excluding panels from discriminating in assessing research quality on the basis of the format in which research was presented (e.g., textbook, dictionary, patent application etc.). As we anticipated and feared, however, in the absence of a major drive to communicate this more broadly, this point has not filtered through to individual academics at grass roots level in universities, or those who manage departmental submissions and 'guide' colleagues on how to spend their time.

In previous submissions CAPP has pointed out the key role of textbooks in sustaining and reproducing what Thomas Kuhn in his classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* calls 'normal science' and of what he calls 'postrevolutionary texts' in consolidating the dominance of new paradigms. We highlighted the fact that pressures created by the RAE, QAA etc have led to university heads of department and other opinion formers actively discouraging their colleagues from undertaking these projects, even while acknowledging the need for them. There is as yet no sense among academics that even 'paradigm-shaping' will earn the same RAE ratings as journal articles or monographs, which are generally seen as the 'gold standard' or at least the 'safest option'.

Timing

8. As well as affecting the type of manuscripts submitted to publishers, the RAE has also affected the flow. Instead of a relatively steady stream from year to year, each successive RAE has brought increasingly large peaks in the year leading up to the cut-off date for submissions followed by increasingly deep troughs that last for about 12 months.
9. This new publishing cycle has further exacerbated the already severe pressures on the financial viability of monograph publishing affecting both commercial and university presses as
 - more books overall chase static or declining library resources with particularly big dips in sales per title in 'peak' years
 - publishers have to 'gear up' for 'peak' throughput leaving them with higher overhead costs per title in 'trough' years.
10. The 'peak and trough' cycle has also affected journal publishing. The bottle neck of manuscripts created around the RAE submission date means that journal pagination is affected adversely, as it is difficult to plan ahead for the right pricing or journals have to hold back papers to smooth over the variations. Furthermore, the pressure put on journal editors to squeeze papers in before the submission deadline may mean journals being pushed into publishing extra unbudgeted pages, with resultant cost implications for the publishers and potential price increases for subscribers in subsequent years.
11. It is important that the RAE is aware of the speed of the production process of both books and journals. The interval between the announcement of individual panels in November 1995 and the submission date of 31 March 1996, for example, was five to six months. This may seem like plenty of time, but were a panel to decide on a particular hierarchy of journal quality within its discipline and announce this hierarchy, it would almost certainly be too late for authors to target those journals listed with any likelihood of getting published in them within the timeframe.
12. The possible delay between acceptance of a journal article and its publication as a result of any backlogs of papers awaiting publication also needs to be taken into account. It has been known for some journals to have 'two year publication backlogs'. Authors unaware of such a backlog before submitting a manuscript could well find it missing an RAE deadline while waiting to be published. There is also the risk of unforeseen problems at a publishing house or a printer pushing a journal's publication date past the submission deadline. It would be interesting to know whether any special pleading for the author was allowed in cases where either of the above occurred.

Quality

13. The pressure of the RAE deadline has clearly impacted upon the quality of submissions, with both book and journal publishers experiencing last-minute floods of sub-standard proposals.
14. The sub-standard material often comes in the form of 'salami-slicing' – one decent chunk of research being submitted along with a number of thin papers.
15. Other lower quality papers are submitted by inexperienced researchers who were originally employed as teaching staff, but have been encouraged to become 'research-active'. This new community of authors, who would not ordinarily be publishing papers in journals except for the pressure of the RAE, may be unfamiliar with the journal publishing system, and therefore not in such a good position to produce a publishable paper.
16. There is also some evidence that even experienced authors rush to get material published on time for the RAE and will also put pressure on journal editors to ensure that it is published in time to be included.

Effect on editorial boards and journal staff

17. The increase in the volume (and irregular flow) of material seeking publication in journals clearly increases the amount of refereeing in academia, and therefore the pressure on a finite pool of referees. The lower quality of proposals submitted in the run up to the RAE deadline, as mentioned in points 13 to 16, also affects the editorial boards. The editing and peer review process clearly continues to do its job in weeding out these papers, as the overall standard of articles published in journals remains consistently high, but this does further increase the burden on the refereeing community, most of whose work is done out of goodwill, rather than for financial reward.

18. There is no evidence of academics refusing to review any more papers, or even complaining about the increased quantity (or flow) of manuscripts. It seems clear that academics still see the importance of peer-review to academia, and do not stint at reviewing. It must, however, be the case that having to referee more papers will either result in some of them being delayed more than they would have been otherwise or result in their activities being curtailed, given the limited time that academics have available to them.
19. The RAE's effect on quality and flow of manuscripts also affects in-house journal staff. Editors usually read papers as they arrive in order to see whether they are suitable for refereeing and, if so, by whom. The increased volume of material must add to their workloads, and also to the work of the administrative assistants who control the flow of manuscripts through the refereeing process. Fortunately, the RAE does make some provision for crediting the work that editors do, especially on journals with international standing. Journal offices these days are usually funded by the publishers of the journals. As the RAE does not seem to result in an increase in journal sales and the funding of editorial offices tends to bear some relation to the revenue the journals generates, this means that these editorial offices may be working harder without additional support.
20. For journals where balance within an issue is important (i.e. the social sciences and the humanities rather than the sciences), there is additional pressure on the editors, who need to fix issue contents further in advance than they might wish to, and be firmer in not changing issues around. Potentially, it could also mean the holding over to subsequent issues of papers not subject to RAE pressures, i.e. those from overseas.
21. The RAE also leads to stronger demands from authors, who tend to seek more detailed clarification of referee's comments, presumably to speed up their revision in order to ensure acceptance and publication. This also adds to the workload of editors, their assistants and the referees.

Impact on UK journals

22. The over reliance on impact factor as a measure means that good papers are more likely to be submitted to a broad based US journal rather than a specialist journal in a particular field. This is because the impact factors of US journals will always be higher as they have a larger circulation and this is damaging the ability of good quality journals to serve the needs of a specific community of interest.

Effect on different subject areas

23. Impact factors also affect subject areas. In particular, for clinical medicine, a discipline where there is not a strong tradition or need for citation, the impact factors of clinical journals is significantly lower than for example basic life science. This means that it can be difficult to persuade UK-based authors to publish in even good quality specialist clinical journals or even those journals that try to cover the transition between clinical and basic research. Furthermore, it would appear that clinical research in the UK is being significantly disadvantaged by the RAE and is undoubtedly in decline. The RAE is not the only reason for this, but it does have an impact. Clinical research is no longer funded to the same extent by hospitals and therefore there is a stronger reliance on university funding, but for the reasons stated above a scientist is likely to be ranked more positively by the RAE for working in for example cell biology than in cancer research. There may well be other disciplines that suffer in this way.

A lighter touch

24. As outsiders to academic institutions but closely connected to those who work within them, publishers are well placed to observe how the administrative burden associated with the RAE has increased with each successive exercise, especially on panel members and those in university departments charged with research management in general and RAE submissions in particular. Both of these groups are inevitably disproportionately drawn from the most experienced researchers best placed to make mature and broad ranging contributions in their respective fields. The opportunity costs are very substantial and any moves judged possible towards a lighter touch form of regulation on a less frequent or rolling basis would, in our view, offer substantial benefits in pushing back research boundaries as well as addressing some of the publishing-specific issues raised above.