



# Regional Studies Association

## Response to the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment: Call for Evidence by the Higher and Further Education Funding Council for England (hefce)

### 1. Introduction

The Regional Studies Association (RSA) is a leading international learned society with global membership and a strong presence in the UK, representing a cross-disciplinary range of academics and policy makers engaged in questions of regional development in its many facets.

This statement sets out the response of RSA to the call for evidence by the hefce independent review of the role of metrics in research assessment. Our observations apply to the social sciences generally and more specifically to cross-disciplinary research across regional and urban studies.

The RSA notes that the UK has gained considerable experience in the evaluation of the quality of research through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and its successor, Research Excellence Framework (REF) processes over recent years. In the present round of evaluation (REF 2014) universities were required to submit three types of evidence: 1) research environment statements; 2) evidence of impact, through impact statements and case studies and 3) research outputs. This approach relies on mixed methods and a range of evidence for the purpose of evaluation. Whilst there are inevitable debates about the REF process, it is acknowledged that as a system of evaluation, it is widely respected internationally. In moving forward from REF 2014, careful consideration should be given to both the existing strengths of the present system, as well as reflecting on potential areas for improvements. Lessons might also be learnt from other international approaches towards research assessment, including experience with the application of other methods including metrics.

### 2. Use of Metrics in Research Assessment

It is noted that in 2008 and 2009 hefce ran a pilot exercise to test the potential for using bibliometric indicators of research quality in the REF. At that time it was concluded that citation information was not sufficiently robust to be used formulaically or as a primary indicator of quality. As pointed out in the REF2014 publication on Panel Criteria and Working Methods (REF 01.2012), for the present REF 2014 *'panels relied on expert review as the primary means of assessing outputs in order to reach rounded judgements about the full range of assessment criteria ('originality, significance and rigour' (REF01.212:8)'. Apart from the economics sub-panel, other sub-panels within Panel 13 examining outputs related to fields within the social sciences, decided that they 'will neither receive nor make use of citation data, or any form of bibliometric analysis including journal impact factors.'*(REF 01.2012: 66). Amongst our membership there are real concerns about the adoption of metrics when applied to research assessment.

In line with observations made in evidence presented by the Academy of Social Sciences to this review, the RSA would make the following points.

First, from a social science perspective bibliometric indicators are perceived as an unreliable guide to quality. Because the typical volume of outputs from a social science perspective is relatively low, bibliometrics are often, at best, a marginal guide to research activity. Thus they can only be a partial indicator of performance. The number of citations may not be a real guide to quality of the original research. Indeed, it only offers a single – imperfect – measure of impact. This is important in a field where both qualitative as well as quantitative research techniques are both valued. A high level of citations may, for example, reflect the outcome of a highly topical issue or controversy and its prominence in wider debates. It may also reflect other practices, including ‘citation networks’ amongst a small group of researchers, the ‘gaming’ of impact factors by publishers and editorial boards, a proliferation of authorships amongst academics – to the point where the true author of a paper is impossible to determine. High citations may also be a consequence of ‘open access’ outlets where accessibility may be free but quality not necessarily assured. High citations may also reflect wider recognition of a particular author, who may have shared authorship of a paper with a number of other lesser known researchers. As a result, metrics cannot readily capture co-authorship between individuals with different amounts of experience or people located in institutions within different countries. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that metric based approaches disadvantage early career and emerging scholars, especially those from less prestigious institutions. This has the potential to form a significant barrier to the further development of the discipline, as well as the UK higher education sector. Finally, it may also lead to the further development of a two-tier system of higher education with national and international perceptions of an ‘elite’ and ‘second rate’ set of institutions and academics.

Second, since there is a predominance of Anglo-American journals across the disciplines, this may be prejudicial to publications in English-language journals outside this core. It would also be to the disadvantage of publications in other languages, given the relative dominance of English in international publications. Critically, a metric-based approach has the potential to reduce the engagement of UK-based researchers and universities with other parts of the world, resulting in reduced knowledge, flow of students and wider trade in goods and services.

Third, impact factor ranking of journals is not necessarily a proxy for quality. There are a very wide range of journals across the social sciences. Some of these speak to broad audiences, such as our own *Regional Studies* journal in the field of regional and urban studies. Others may be focussed on particular but narrow fields of enquiry that should be equally valued. Unlike in certain fields of science, there is not in the social sciences (or in regional and urban studies) a clearly recognised hierarchy of journals. Different journals offer a different contribution within the field of enquiry. As a result citation figures may reflect the number of readers within a particular area of study, rather than reflect the importance, significance or quality of a particular piece of work. A risk of using the journal impact factor as an indicator of assessment is that it is likely to lead universities to push their academics to publish in a relatively narrow range of particular journals. This again could damage the career trajectory of early career academics as they are forced to compete with more established colleagues in the field for publication in distinct set of high ranked journals.

Fourth, there are concerns that metrics such as citations and journal impact scores in the social sciences are blunt instruments. Their application would suggest that the evaluation of the quality of research in the fields that the RSA represents is a precise and quantitative process, which it is not. In this regard, the RSA would refer to experience from elsewhere.

For example a comparison might be made with Australia, where the Australian Government's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) relies largely on metrics. Recent experience with this programme highlights weaknesses of this approach. Overall, in comparison with the REF the ERA is less accurate and detailed than the REF. There is a perception in Australia that ERA rankings are overly affected by reputation rather than the quality of work produced in the assessment period. In addition, a reliance on metrics has the very real potential to stifle innovation in academic work as it places too great an emphasis on publishing in established journals. This makes it extremely difficult to develop and launch new journal entrants into the market as authors choice may be determined solely by impact factors and journal ranking. Over time this would lead to stagnation in the journals market which would not be good for the discipline. It might under-value contributions in the Humanities and the Social Sciences as books are downplayed and applied research is heavily discounted. It is important to note that the Australian Research Council (ARC) has acknowledged the limitations of its metric approach and is now working with a number of universities across Australia to develop an impact measure. To date, little progress has been reported and this suggests there are very real challenges with an over-reliance on readily available quantitative indicators. It is also important to note that the ARC has not adopted a measure based solely on metrics: a sample of research outputs are collected and are made available to reviewers for assessment. This process, however, appears to be both limited and flawed. A metrics based approach will favour volume over quality in some instances, encouraging publishing in large teams so that everyone gets cited. This in turn may lead to perverse outcomes as senior academics attempt to inappropriately claim authorship. Finally, we would draw your attention to the fact that the development of a metric in Australia has been both controversial and confronted by some difficulties. The first attempt to develop a measure was challenged in the Federal Court, resulting in a significant shift in direction – a reliance on impact factors. Importantly, policy and programme development in Australia originally rejected impact factors as they were seen to embed significant flaws.

Fifth, metric-based approaches disadvantage multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research as authors from a range of fields look to publish outside of their area and, potentially, in new journals that do not form the 'core' of an individual discipline. This is a significant challenge for governments and society, as researchers, the community and government seek solutions to some of the most pressing questions confronting nations – how to address the social determinants of ill-health, how to achieve an inclusive multi-cultural society, how to best manage the ageing of the population in developed economies – inevitably requires a broad range of perspectives and expertise. Metric-based approaches to research evaluation place a further hurdle in the path to finding a solution to these issues.

Sixth, traditional metric based approaches might not always be up to speed with the latest developments in webometric methods, which can measure online dissemination and impact. The development of the social media culture among early career and established researchers has a continuous impact on the dissemination of research output by: enlarging the size of the audiences, increasing dissemination speeds, allowing direct cross-disciplinary interactions. In this environment

citations and journal impact scores are not efficient as these do not account for the openness of this environment, in which dissemination networks, links and paths are more relevant, but are much harder to define and map out, as these require specific tools, data, and expertise. The latter is not always on hand.

### 3. Conclusions

Overall, the RSA recognises the drive towards developing more systematic approaches towards the evaluation of research quality, including examining the value of metrics for this purpose. We recognise the progress made through the evolution of the RAE and REF processes in the assessment of research quality in UK universities. We acknowledge that the present system is far from being perfect. Nevertheless, we believe that a process of incremental change building on the lessons learnt through the subsequent rounds of research assessment rather than wholesale change is the way forward. We acknowledge the superficial attraction of the use of metrics as an apparently more 'scientific' solution. However, as we have pointed out above there are considerable risks and weaknesses in using a metrics approach to evaluate the quality of research within our own field of regional and urban studies. There are serious limitations where the nature of research is both qualitative and quantitative, study is across disciplines, is specialist and general, where there is no clear hierarchy of journals and where volume of citations is not a clear indicator of quality or significance. We understand that hefce have signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which warns against too much reliance on the use of formalised indicators, such as journal-based metrics, in research assessment. In line with this, the RSA therefore urge caution in the use of metrics in research assessment. The RSA therefore urge caution in the use of metrics in research assessment.

On behalf of the RSA Board and Chief Executive

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