

NATIONAL SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

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Canberra

Frameworks for Assessment of Australian Research Quality

The next big issue in research policy – the measurement of research quality – was one of the main topics of a major Round Table held on 1 June at the Australian National Archives in Canberra by the National Scholarly Communications Forum (NSCF).

Sir Gareth Roberts, author of the recent review of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise, indicated that Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) allowed funders to measure the quality of research arising from the investment of public monies. In turn, this allowed the academic sector to assess its success and to inform its future strategies. The outputs of RAEs could also inform future funding models.

Sir Gareth outlined the structures of the future United Kingdom RAE exercise. Previous RAE exercises, while not without controversy, had clearly benefited universities in terms of raising research quality and funding levels. Sir Gareth said at the national levels, "the RAE is a big game in town". While most countries he said operated a "dual support system of funding", he also stressed the appeal of what he termed "third leg funding" within such exercises as they benefited collaborations with industry and the community - of particular relevance to Australia's regions. Sir Gareth met separately with both Dr Brendan Nelson, the Education Minister, and Science Minister, Mr Peter McGauran.

Dr Evan Arthur, Acting Group Manager, Innovation and Research Systems Group, of the Department of Education, Science and Technology, indicated that the Government's decision to develop quality and accessibility frameworks reflected the Government's concern to increase what is known about the quality of Australian research. While the Government has not taken any decision as yet to implement a quality assessment framework, nor to link it to an allocation of funds, it will be consulting closely in the near future with the sector on the concept of such a framework to cover both universities and publicly funded research agencies.

Dr Arthur outlined a number of key questions about a quality assessment framework. He revealed that the Government wants to explore improvements in the accessibility of research as part of a process of improving our understanding of quality. The Government believes that it has a major policy interest in improving the accessibility of research. It is therefore decided to pursue the agendas of making research quality more apparent, and research results more accessible, in parallel.

Professor Malcolm Gillies, Chair of the NSCF and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) at the Australian National University noted that the NSCF Round Table had attracted

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so many leading figures in the research policy arena, for example the Australian Academies, Australian Research Council, Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee, CSIRO, universities, government agencies and the Chief Scientist. This showed that the NSCF Forum was an ideal framework for broad-ranging discussion of research policy "in a way that is constructive for all forms of future development in this area".

NSCF participants heard from Sir Gareth that a "light-touch" quality research assessment exercise, for Australian universities and relevant research organisations, building on international best practice, could be of major benefit to Australia. In terms of accessibility of research the NSCF constituents will work with international partners on a number of fronts especially to develop the concept of "public funding, public knowledge, public access".

The Department of Education, Science and Training sponsored the NSCF Round Table, which was convened by Colin Steele, Emeritus Fellow, Australian National University, and organised by the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The forum was based on the DEST publication *Changing Research Practices in the Digital Information and Communication Environment*. Summary available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/respubs/changing_res_prac/exec_summary.htm

The powerpoints from the presentations and specific outcomes of the NSCF Forum are available at <http://www.humanities.org.au/NSCF/current.htm>

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