

The RQF: assessing the quality and impact of research

In May 2004, the Australian Government announced the formulation of a quality and accessibility framework for publicly funded research, to replace prior guidelines. How does the Research Quality Framework (RQF) affect libraries? Libraries in the tertiary education sector are the most directly affected, in that the knowledge needs of research academics will be guided by new resourcing principles; the patterns of published outputs (whether in print or electronic form) of research teams will change. Libraries which partner with academic research projects will need to appreciate the implications of the formula. Research about libraries by academics will have to achieve prescribed levels of quality and impact in order to be funded by the federal government.

In February 2007, ALIA was requested to provide input to the formulation of the RQF. Associate Professor Graeme Johanson (Monash University) and Dr Kerry Smith (Curtin University; convenor, ALIA Research Committee) were amongst those who volunteered to attend the Panel 11 discussions, one of a series of Canberra workshops arranged by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), and were chosen from among 900 others.

The aim of the RQF is to develop a new basis for assessment of the quality and impact of publicly funded research. Borrowing government rhetoric, the RQF aims to be transparent to government and taxpayers so that they are better informed about the results of the public investment in research; to ensure that all publicly funded research agencies and research providers are encouraged to focus on the quality and relevance of their research; and to avoid a high cost of implementation and imposing a high administration burden on research providers — see <www.dest.gov.au>.

[gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/research_quality_framework/](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/research_quality_framework/)>.

In its early manifestations, the RQF was crudely modelled. The 38 universities in Australia lobbied successfully for additional features, including a requirement that elements of the RQF assessment should include an examination of research quality, and research impact outcomes, and that expert panels advise on how to interpret quality and impact. The February consultation discussed these elements.

In our discipline (and other social sciences) 'quality' is not easily measured. A list of disciplinary journal titles, ranked according to international measures, or high levels of citation of individual author-researchers, has limited recognition in practice. If the RQF relies on the value of research grants received by research groups, it should not just focus on competitive grants. Many non-competitive grants advance the pursuit of useful knowledge. There are further uncertainties with the concept of 'impact', which is hard to separate from 'quality'. The local context of and immediate need for research influences 'impact', but might be hard to document as evidence of influencing the 'public good' on a wide scale.

What happens next? Even though the 'library' world as we know it in Australia might not loom large in the research stakes, it is to be hoped that library/information-related projects and teams will be amongst those that are put forward by their universities to participate, if not in RQF 2008, then in the rounds after that. The RQF decisions will determine research funding for universities for five years to come.

Information research also comes within other panels, more particularly Panel 4: Mathematical and Information Sciences and Technology and, try as it did, ALIA was unsuccessful in gaining a place at this table in the February 2007 Panel 4 discussions. The next step was to ensure that LIS researchers nominated as assessors for the panels. While securing membership to the assessment panels might be seen as a lobbying exercise, the end result is a place in the research realm of universities in Australia. It is a wake-up call for library professionals and academics to take a serious look at their professional profile and its research base in Australia. Membership of assessment panels means that we will have an expert from our field in the assessment of projects that are directly relevant to or relate to libraries and our information world. ALIA has done its best to encourage well-regarded LIS researchers at home and abroad to nominate as assessors for the panels.

Successful chairs for the 13 research assessment panels were announced in April and are listed on the DEST website. The panel in which libraries seem to mostly fit is Panel 11: Law, Education and Professional Practices, and its Chair is Professor Hilary Charlesworth from The Australian National University. As *inCite* goes to press, another DEST meeting is being held in July for representatives to meet panel chairs. ALIA's representatives to this meeting are Dr Kerry Smith and Professor Don Schauder.

For more information, see the article 'Academic libraries and the Research Quality Framework' by Gaby Haddow in *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, March 2007, 38(1). To subscribe to *AARL*, contact <journal.subscriptions@alia.org.au> or see <<http://alia.org.au/publishing/subscriptions.html>>.

Graeme Johanson and Kerry Smith
K.Smith@curtin.edu.au
graeme.johanson@infotech.monash.edu.au



Leigh Mardon

BARCODES

Superior high-level accuracy

Bar Code labels

Verifiers

Plastic Library Cards

RFID solutions

Quality and service you can trust

(03) 9556 8111

Fax: (03) 9553 1740

email: bar.code@leighmardon.com.au

1144 Nepean Hwy, Highett Australia

www.leighmardon.com.au