Support Grows for British Exercise to Allocate University Funds

Next year British universities go under the microscope for the country's fifth Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), an attempt to rank departments' research output and help the government invest wisely in academic infrastructure. And even some of its most persistent critics acknowledge that the RAE, which has drawn international attention, has overcome a rocky start and is working increasingly well. "Each successive RAE is moving closer to the consensus [of what constitutes high-class research]," says Paul Cottrell, the assistant general secretary of the Association of University Teachers, which opposed RAE's introduction in 1986.

The RAE began as a way to funnel dwindling resources into the best research programs at a time when severe cuts in public spending raised fears of a major brain drain. Unlike the U.S. National Research Council (NRC) ratings (see main text), a school's RAE ranking has a direct impact on government funding. "The better you do [in the RAE], the more money you get," says John Rogers, RAE manager at the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which oversees the exercise. The process, which covers 68 fields, puts every university department or program under scrutiny by an independent panel of peers. Each department receives a score, from 1 to 5*, that is supposed to be based on four pieces of work submitted by every participating researcher and such information as prizes, outside funding, and research plans. "The gold standard is always international excellence," says Rogers. That score, adjusted for the number of participating researchers, determines funding levels.

Despite its narrower focus and deliberate elitism—last year about 75% of the council's $1.3 billion budget went to the top 13% of Britain's 192 institutions of higher education—the British assessment exercise has raised some of the same concerns as the NRC surveys. "Teaching is not esteemed as highly as research and always gets a back seat," Cottrell argues. Although teaching skills are evaluated in a separate exercise, the Teaching Quality Assessment, the outcome is not linked directly to funding. The question of how much panels are affected by a researcher's reputation also remains an issue, although Rogers says attitudes will play a smaller role next year than in earlier exercises.

Rogers calls RAE "the longest standing assessment process on this scale worldwide," and its influence may soon be spreading beyond its borders. In Japan, where university funding has been based on precedent and enrollment and there is little oversight of performance, the government is moving slowly toward greater accountability. This year the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (Monbusho) hopes to create an evaluation organization that will serve initially as an accreditation board to review curricula and to prod universities to raise education standards. But an advisory panel has also recommended that Monbusho begin evaluating university research efforts on a departmental level, with the results somehow tied to funding for new buildings and large-scale equipment.

The RAE approach has also found a home in Eastern Europe, where this spring the Czech Republic hopes to begin a long-awaited review of academic research at its 27 universities. The reports from the visiting panels, which will include foreign scientists, are expected to lead to a two-tier university system that favors a handful of elite schools.

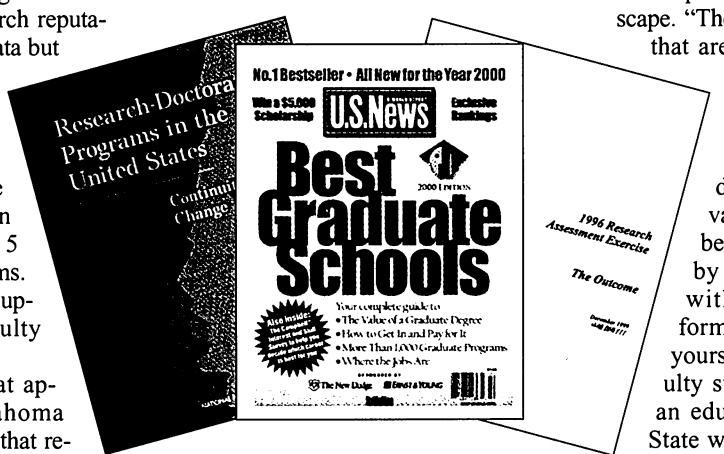
–MICHAEL HAGMANN

With reporting by Dennis Normile and Richard Stone.

Not by reputation alone

By tackling these thorny issues early, Kuh hopes to avoid the blizzard of criticism directed at the previous survey for flaws ranging from factual errors to a disregard for applied fields. First up is the charge that the NRC relied too heavily on research reputation, one of many categories of data but the sole source for the numerical rankings of programs. For the reputational rankings, NRC asked more than 16,000 scientists to assess the quality of the faculty and the relative change in program strength over the past 5 years for as many as 52 programs. Each rater was provided a list, supplied by the university, of faculty members in each program.

Many academics believe that approach is badly flawed. Oklahoma State's Bell, for example, argues that relying on reputations penalizes what novelist Tom Wolfe has called "flyover universities" like hers that don't have national reputations but emphasize teaching. And it's not just those on the bottom who complain. "Most people think that it was a mistake," says Jules LaPides, outgoing president of the 400-member Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), about the NRC's decision to gather lots of kinds of data, but to rank programs simply by reputation. "It legitimizes a flawed concept, that there is a single 'best' graduate program for all students. But graduate education is not a golf tournament, with only one winner."



Pulling rank. *U.S. News* offers a much splashier wrapping for its survey than does the NRC, left, or the RAE.

Vanderbilt's Graham and others argue that reputational rankings have become obsolete, as fields expand too rapidly for anyone to remain familiar with all the players. He favors quantitative measures of research productivity that do not rely on the memories of beleaguered reviewers. Such measures as citation impact, levels of funding, and awards, when applied on a per capita basis, he argues, would provide a more accurate picture of the current research landscape. "There are a lot of rising institutions that are being ignored," he says. "The next NRC study should help to reveal this layer of excellence that is waiting to be tapped."

Critics also note that larger departments have an unfair advantage in reputational rankings because of the bigger shadow cast by their graduates, as do those with a handful of standout performers. "The best way to improve yourself quickly is to hire a few faculty superstars," says David Webster, an education professor at Oklahoma State who has written about both NRC studies. But superstars don't necessarily enhance the educational experiences for grad students, he says.

Yet few administrators are willing to jettison reputation. The reputational ratings "don't capture the whole picture, but they capture people's perceptions, and that's important," says Yale's Levin. And even Webster believes that "reputational rankings, for