



# President's column

**Peter Hall\***

## **The RQF: Concentrating on our research strengths**

By now, most members of the Society working in Australian universities will have been involved to some extent in plans for the Research Quality Framework. Some members have expressed concern about the views voiced by management in their universities, and have raised apprehensions about the influence the RQF might have.

We seem destined to have some sort of RQF in the long-term future. While the federal opposition has declared itself to be opposed to the currently planned RQF, and indicated that, if elected, it would introduce an alternative that was less expensive to implement and concentrated more on measures of quality, Labor's RQF would still have some of the key characteristics of the Government's proposal.

In particular, both the Government and the opposition envisage a research assessment procedure that encourages Australian universities to concentrate on their research strengths. We all know that when a government says to universities that it is going to 'encourage' them to do something, it means that it will reorganise the distribution of funding so as to make doing anything else particularly distasteful and unattractive.

In an environment where research funding is not increasing, concentrating on our research strengths means discarding those aspects of our research where we are not so strong. Despite the difficulties we are experiencing today, in the mathematical sciences in Australia we still enjoy very significant research strengths, and it is feasible to enhance them at the expense of research in other parts of the mathematical sciences. However (and in this I'm sure I differ from many Australian university managers), it is not clear to me that we should be setting about enhancing all our strengths and, correspondingly, winding down the other areas where we don't have quite so much of a reputation.

The UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), on which the RQF is loosely based, had in part this effect. It was at least partially responsible for a decline in UK expertise in strategically important areas such as modern analysis, some parts of PDE, and statistics, as universities withdrew from those fields where they had perceived weaknesses and directed funding elsewhere. Of course, relatively small fields were the most vulnerable. If a research area where the UK was not widely represented became temporarily 'weak' in a particular university, perhaps because of a retirement or resignation, it was unlikely to be brought up to strength quickly because of the difficulty of finding suitable staff close at hand. As a result the research area became vulnerable to predatory strategic planning for future RAEs.

Thus, there are dangers in restricting attention to our strengths, and narrowing diversity in order to increase funding in areas where we perform best. This is particularly true in a small country like Australia, capable of fielding only modest research resources. Australia

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needs both depth and breadth in the mathematical sciences, both now and in the future. Shedding breadth for the sake of depth is not necessarily a wise decision, especially in the 21st century when the mathematical sciences are becoming increasingly multidisciplinary. Multidisciplinarity is present both within mathematics, where tools from several areas are used to solve problems in one particular area; and between mathematics and many different fields of science and engineering, where a wide variety of mathematical methods are used to solve problems of substantial, immediate practical importance.

How can we preserve diversity in scientific research, and at the same time enhance our strengths, in an environment where research funding is at best static? Perhaps the only feasible approach is to have periodic reviews of research in Australian universities, not just in the mathematical sciences but also in other fields, conducted largely by scientists and scholars based abroad. Those reviews should identify gaps in our capability that need to be filled, as well as areas where we are excellent. They should be authoritative, and have teeth; that is, our research funders and research managers must heed the reviewers' advice.

Other aspects of the issue of focusing on our research strengths should also give us cause to reconsider the directions we are taking. Over the last decade Australian universities have developed a significant redundancy culture, where staff with continuing appointments are dismissed or come under pressure to leave their jobs. The ardour of universities for enhancing their research strengths, by discarding continuing staff who might not augment the institutions' RQF performance, is currently causing significant stress in some Australian universities.

In this respect the Australian RQF experience is likely to differ substantially from its counterpart for the UK RAE. Australian university managers are more enthusiastic about making academic staff redundant, or threatening to make them redundant, than are their counterparts in any other country of which I'm aware. Quite apart from the highly unproductive tensions that waves of redundancies introduce to the workplace, they create obstacles to hiring strong research staff from abroad.

Let me give an example. I was overseas in April last year when *The Australian* published an article on the efforts being made at a Group of Eight university to shed staff who, the university's managers felt, might not enhance that institution's RQF performance. The URL<sup>1</sup> for the article zipped around the world within hours of appearing on the web. It motivated discussion, within the Australian expatriate academic community and among foreign scientists and scholars, of the nature of workplace relations in Australian universities and of the undesirability of taking an academic position there. Although this discussion initially centred on the particular institution involved, it quickly broadened to a critique of management capabilities in all our universities. I expect that recent media attention given to the current round of RQF-motivated redundancies will have provoked similar discussion abroad.

For all these reasons, moves in our universities to focus more sharply on Australia's research strengths, and eliminate weaknesses, need to be made more carefully and thoughtfully than they have been in the past. Australian university managers should take pains to ensure that they enhance, rather than damage, the nation's long-term research performance.

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<sup>1</sup>The original article is no longer available free of charge on the web, but a copy can be accessed through HighBeam Research at [http://calbears.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_hb4692/is\\_200604/ai\\_n17518181](http://calbears.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb4692/is_200604/ai_n17518181)