

The shifting landscape in higher education and research

Jonathan Matthews and **Thomas Kohut**, of the British Academy's Higher Education Policy Team, explain the issues and concerns surrounding a number of recent Government initiatives affecting higher education and research in the UK.

The shifting landscape

Changes to elements of the higher education (HE) and research landscape have recently been sketched out by the Government in its higher education Green Paper¹ and in the Nurse Review of the Research Councils.² Together with the announcement in December 2015 of a review – to be led by Lord Stern (President of the British Academy) – of how research funding is assessed through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the funding and assessment architecture in the UK could shift dramatically in the coming years.

The focus of the Green Paper is the planned Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This originally stems from a Conservative Party manifesto promise, and the Minister's foreword emphasises the need for a focus on teaching excellence, so that students can know what constitutes 'value for money', and so that Government can be confident students gain 'skills' that make them employable as a result of university training.

In terms of the mechanics of this new system for assessing teaching quality, it is anticipated that the TEF will start with an early version in 2016/17, in which all universities that have met the current quality assurance threshold will pass at 'Level 1'. This will entitle universities at Level 1 to raise fees along with inflation from 2017/18. Further levels (potentially four) will then be established, in which the intention seems to be to set a maximum fee for each level of award.

1. *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Cm 9141 (6 November 2015).

2. *Ensuring a successful UK research endeavour: A Review of the UK Research Councils*, by Paul Nurse (19 November 2015).

The Green Paper's proposals came shortly before the report of the Nurse Review of the Research Councils. As such, it merely hinted at a simplification of the research landscape, referring to a need to merge back-office functions, as suggested in the 2014 Triennial Review of Research Councils. It also pointed to a need to lower the burden of conducting the REF through a 'greater use of metrics and other measures to "refresh" the REF results and capture emerging pockets of research excellence in between full peer review.'³

Importantly, the Green Paper stated a commitment to the dual support system for research through 'dual funding streams' – which currently come through the Research Councils and, for Quality Related (QR) funds, through the Higher Education Funding Councils. But it muddied the waters around who would have responsibility for administering each stream, given the suggested re-shaping of the role of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), including establishing a new regulator, the Office for Students.

The Nurse Review of the Research Councils proposes the creation of a new body, Research UK, which would be led by a single Chief Executive Officer with responsibility for reporting to Government. Within Research UK, the integrity of the existing seven Research Councils would be maintained. It is not clear whether the intention is that the administration of QR funds would be taken over by a newly established Research UK and, in his appearance before the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Sir Paul Nurse did not seem to have any firm recommendation on this either way.

How the British Academy is engaging in the debate

The HE and research community was of course consulted as part of the Nurse Review: the British Academy submitted a strong response. And the Academy has continued

3. *Fulfilling our Potential*, p. 73.

to engage on behalf of the humanities and social sciences disciplines in its recent response to the consultation on the Green Paper, where comments are made on the new structures outlined in the Green Paper and Nurse Review combined.⁴

Indeed, by not conceiving of the HE and research system as a whole, Government risks developing a system of policy and regulation that does not reflect the ways in which universities operate. It is essential that the consequences of these separate reviews are considered by Government together. The framing of teaching and employability (in the Green Paper) separately from structural changes to the Research Councils (in the Nurse Review), and research assessment (in the forthcoming Stern Review), could result in a new system that is disjointed.

Teaching Excellence Framework

Take first the proposals for the TEF. The main challenges of a teaching excellence assessment system are establishing a robust and shared definition of quality, its measurement, and the evidence for poor quality in the first place. The British Academy has stressed the need to analyse with rigour the evidence that teaching, across disciplines, is indeed ‘the poor cousin to research’⁵ that Government appears to think it is.

Additionally, the metrics that are and will be used to measure teaching quality have not yet been detailed by Government. Is what constitutes teaching ‘quality’ uniform across disciplines? Any system would need flexibility and a degree of discipline specificity, and it is helpful that the Green Paper makes this clear. The Academy has suggested that Government should work closely with the four national academies⁶ across disciplines to assemble evidence on what this means in practice. The use of metrics to assess teaching quality should be done with caution, particularly in the case of student opinion. At the least, any measures that are relied upon in an initial round of TEF should be examined by expert panels who are able to contextualise the metrics employed.

The separation of teaching and research

Perhaps more fundamentally, the apparent separation of research and teaching risks making research-led teaching less likely, and this is often teaching of the best quality. Reflecting on the new structures outlined in the Green Paper and Nurse Review combined, the British Academy has expressed concern at the apparent lack of one body with overall oversight of the higher education and research landscape. Vulnerability in a subject may exist across both teaching and research, and co-ordination of the two will be more challenging if they are separated in the proposed new structure. It would have an impact

4. The British Academy responded to the Nurse Review of Research Councils on 24 April 2015, and to the Green Paper consultation on 15 January 2016. Both responses can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/policy/responsetogov.cfm

5. *Fulfilling Our Potential*, p. 8.

6. The British Academy, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Medical Sciences.

on the subjects themselves, right through the system to postgraduate and postdoctoral level, and into the research system and the future supply of researchers.

The choices of students at undergraduate level will continue to impact on the behaviour of universities, particularly on whether or not certain courses will be offered year on year. It is possible that some subjects will be placed under greater pressure, across disciplines, as student numbers drop, or as they are deemed too expensive to be taught with the same fee level. The threat here is not only to the financial sustainability of universities and the viability of courses, but to the long-term supply of UK expertise, expertise that plays a central role in driving productivity and tackling our most pressing global challenges.⁷

Government must give serious consideration to how this system-wide risk is monitored. If this function is not yet assigned to any of the new institutions proposed by these changes, the Government should involve the national academies in discussing potential solutions, to ensure that this particular kind of systemic risk to subjects is monitored and acted upon.

Lessons from the REF and the importance of dual support

Any new system for measuring the quality of teaching must learn lessons from the assessing of quality in research, and be wary of creating too much burden, or setting in motion incentives that are undesirable. The Government should be aware that linking teaching quality to a system of funding will result in much game-playing by institutions, as is already evident with the REF. The risk is that effort will be placed not on actually improving quality, but on the goal of securing greater fees by adapting to the system and scoring highly according to particular metrics.

It may be worth returning to the positioning of teaching within REF – in the most recent REF 2014, departments were not able to enter teaching as a measure of research impact. It is the view of many Fellows of the British Academy that teaching is a key way in which their research has wider impact and benefit – both through the benefits that students gain directly and the ideas that are passed on through those students’ professional lives.

The British Academy has undertaken a significant amount of work on the Research Excellence Framework. Following a thorough consultation process of the Fellowship and Academy award-holders more broadly, it is clear that there is concern about three aspects of REF 2014 in particular: (1) the need to reduce the burden of the exercise; (2) the need to ensure that the behaviours the exercise encourages are beneficial; and (3) the importance of developing a mechanism for recognising the wider benefits of research that has the confidence of both the research community and Government.

Lord Stern has been asked by Government to chair an independent review of research funding in the UK,

7. The British Academy responded to the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee inquiry on the Productivity Plan on 15 September 2015.

specifically through the REF. The secretariat is being provided by Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS), and the review is scheduled to report in June/July 2016.

Perhaps the crucial point to make here is that, however TEF and REF evolve, in this shifting landscape, the dual support system is central to the continued success

and strength of the UK's research base. Every possible step must be taken to maintain it in any new structure to ensure that QR funding retains its essential characteristics: excellence funded wherever it is found, for curiosity-driven, bottom-up research, allowing universities flexibility to make their own decisions about fostering and developing the research environment.

British Academy Schools Language Awards 2015



The winners of the 2015 British Academy Schools Language Awards, at the British Academy on 15 December. Photo: Will Ireland.

As part of its work in fostering the health of the humanities and social sciences, the British Academy runs a programme to promote wider appreciation of the importance of language learning.

In December, the British Academy welcomed the winners of the 2015 British Academy Schools Language Awards. This was the fourth consecutive year the British Academy had held its Schools Language Awards, and they have gone from strength to strength.

To celebrate excellence in language learning, and to support activities that encourage larger numbers of students to take languages to higher levels, the Academy awarded 14 prizes of £4,000 for innovative and creative projects at schools, colleges, universities and other organisations – with two 'National Winners' each receiving an additional £2,000.

The British Academy hopes that the 14 fantastic winners can become hubs of good practice in their region and beyond.

More information on the winners and their projects can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/baslas/