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## What is the best way to assess academic research?

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## Expert opinion

# What is the best way to assess academic research?

**Bahram Bekhradnia**



This year will be the last time the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is conducted in the United Kingdom. From 2009, this system for assessing research quality at higher education institutions will be replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Submissions for the 2008 RAE closed on November 30, but institutions will have to wait until December 2008 to find out the results that will determine funding for the next five years. In the meantime, we talk to Bahram Bekhradnia, Director of the independent think tank Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), about his views of the RAE and whether he thinks the REF will result in better funding allocation.

As in most areas where funding is required, the calls on research funding are far greater than the resources available. "As a result there has to be rationing. The highest quality research should receive the most funding," Bekhradnia says. "One can't assume that the most prestigious universities produce the best research, however, so there has to be a system in place to assess research quality. This is what the RAE sets out to do."

Similarly, as in most areas where demand outstrips supply, the RAE has seen its share of what Bekhradnia calls "game playing" or exploiting the rules to one's own advantage (see also Dr. Moed's analysis in [Research Trends](#)). This has manifested itself in hiring and research decisions designed to attain the

most favorable funding results. The RAE is currently based on review of research by distinguished discipline-based panels. The REF will be much more statistics based. However, while there is currently quite some discussion on whether bibliometrics, and in particular citation analysis, is a suitable way to measure quality, there is little doubt that the RAE enables assessments of quality.

## Time for change

If the RAE aims to assess research quality in order to allocate resources appropriately, and it seems to be achieving this aim, this begs the question of why the system is changing. The main reasons put forth by the Higher Education Funding Council for England are that the RAE is expensive and burdensome for the participating institutions. Bekhradnia is not yet entirely convinced the REF will be less so on either of these fronts but believes that if bibliometrics are to be used in future, they should not dominate the assessment process. "The UK has a strong research reputation, but we should be cautious of any system that will lead to a concentration of research strength at too small a number of institutions. The ideal assessment method would be peer review informed by bibliometrics."

Downloadable versions of HEPI reports, which include analyses of the RAE and REF, can be found [here](#).

For an overview of the RAE, click [here](#).