

News release

The Research Excellence Framework – what does this mean for development science?

The Higher Education Funding Council for Education (HEFCE) proposals for a new Research Excellence Framework, which is set to be introduced after 2008, is unlikely to fully recognise excellence in development science and could hinder the UK's ability to support developing countries achieve international development goals, revealed the UK Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS).

“Development science is an excellent example of a subject which can be applied or user-focussed and cuts across ‘science-based and non-science based’ disciplines. Following consultation with funders and researchers, we strongly recommend that the impacts of the new proposals are explored on development science during the pilot phase and we would be pleased to work with HEFCE to facilitate this,” urges Dr Andrée Carter, director of UKCDS Secretariat.

“As a multi-and inter-disciplinary subject, development science has a real potential to improve the lives of people living in the world's poorest countries” explains Dr Carter. “We have welcomed the opportunity to respond to HEFCE's consultation, as we are committed to supporting excellence in development science research to enable the UK to make a full contribution to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other Government targets. What we are concerned about though, is that the scientific quality and value of development science research may not be fully recognised and we may find that researchers are dissuaded from working in this vital research area”.

Under the proposed framework there will be distinct approaches for the ‘science-based’ disciplines which will be divided into six broad subject groups for assessment and funding. Science quality and therefore the amount of money a department receives from HEFCE, will be determined by bibliometric indicators for research quality and supported by other metrics such as research income and numbers of research students. For other subjects, assessment will be by the new ‘light touch’ peer review process informed by metrics. Development

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science can encompass a wide range of sciences and as such would sit across both systems of assessment. UKCDS believes that an assessment system for 'science-based' subjects that is largely based on citations of papers in peer reviewed journals will reward research with the greatest academic impact and will **not** recognise and adequately reward or encourage research that has economic, societal and policy impact and value. Two separate systems could lead to inconsistent or inadequate assessment and reward of the work of development scientists.

“Although bibliometrics can provide a useful indication of academic impact in some research areas, it is only one measure of quality research,” warns Dr Carter. “It is vital that results of development science research are disseminated in developing countries in a way that meets local needs. This may not always involve publishing papers in top academic journals. Development science research may also be disadvantaged by a system that relies heavily on citations because papers on specific developing countries are less likely to be cited than papers with a UK focus or relevance to developed countries. HEFCE should consider how this can be taken into account.”

UKCDS members have also responded individually to the HEFCE consultation highlighting the need for a more flexible system that recognises research quality and value across the research spectrum. New metrics may need to be developed for some disciplines and UKCDS is keen to work with HEFCE to develop new approaches that could be incorporated into an evaluation framework.

The UKCDS submission to HEFCE can be seen at:

http://www.ukcds.org.uk/news_detail.php?news_id=10

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Notes

The UK Collaborative on Development Sciences - UKCDS, brings together key UK funders and stakeholders who provide support for the development sciences research base.

Membership of UKCDS has been drawn from the wider development sciences community and currently comprises of: Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (Defra), the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the Department for International Development (DfID), the Department of Health, the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC), the Medical Research Council, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Wellcome Trust.