# Research Assessment and the Role of the Library

## A companion report to *A Comparative Review of Research Assessment Regimes in Five Countries and the Role of Libraries in the Research Assessment Process*

**John MacColl**
**RLG Partnership European Director**
**OCLC Research**

Research Assessment and the Role of the Library
John MacColl, for OCLC Research

OCLC Research
Dublin, Ohio  43017  USA
www.oclc.org

Please direct correspondence to:
John MacColl
RLG Partnership European Director
maccollj@oclc.org

Suggested citation:
MacColl, John. 2010. Research Assessment and the Role of the Library.  Report produced by OCLC
Research.  Published online at:  http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2010/2010-01.pdf .

# Contents

# Figures

# Introduction

In 2009, OCLC Research commissioned Key Perspectives in the UK to produce *A Comparative Review of Research Assessment Regimes in Five Countries and the Role of Libraries in the Research Assessment Process*.[1] This report is provided as a companion to the Key Perspectives review, and provides a summary of the key findings of the study, with some context for the recent increase in library involvement in research assessment, and recommendations for research libraries.

The economic potential of highly valued research is now evident as national economies shift to a dependence on knowledge and knowledge-based skills. Publicly funded universities are being drawn into national economic agendas in ways that are new to them and that challenge many traditional academic values. Research libraries, supporting research with a growing range of new and a shrinking number of traditional services, are also being drawn in, though in widely varying ways.

We asked Key Perspectives to carry out research in the Netherlands, Ireland, the UK, Denmark and Australia. These countries were chosen because we were aware that in four of them (the Netherlands, the UK, Denmark and Australia) there were existing national research assessment regimes that involved some element of assessment of "research outputs." Such outputs are managed in their externally published form (mainly as journal articles and monographs) by libraries, while their internally published form is increasingly also of relevance to libraries as they develop institutional repositories of research output, both for open access and to meet various institutional output requirements. In the case of Ireland, which has no existing assessment regime, our interest was in the libraries' involvement in the forms of assessment that may exist internally within universities, and in their anticipation of a national system that might later be imposed.

# The assessment environment

In our Research Information Management (RIM) programme of work, we presume that libraries in research universities need to rethink the services they provide by taking a researcher-centred view. To adapt a phrase coined by Lorcan Dempsey[2], "the research environment reconfigures the library." When we look at university researchers, we see that they inhabit multiple environments. We use the researcher-centric model below (see Figure 1).

This model puts the researcher at the centre, producing research outputs primarily for the purpose of advancing their own field of intellectual exploration, or *domain* (or indeed confluence of domains, in the case of interdisciplinary research). However, many of those outputs are also expropriated by other environments. *Research funding bodies* will often assume some ownership or interest in them if they have provided the funds for the research that produced them. The researcher's *institution* is also likely to want to keep a full record of all outputs produced on the campus, and its mission will influence the research areas it particularly champions. Research funders and institutions both also have interests in making many of these outputs Open Access, and in the case of some funders there are repositories that mandate deposit of these outputs. Institutions commonly maintain Open Access repositories as well, and in other cases these are maintained on behalf of domains ('subject repositories'). Articulation between these environmentally-located repositories therefore makes sense, though is not yet necessarily always effective.
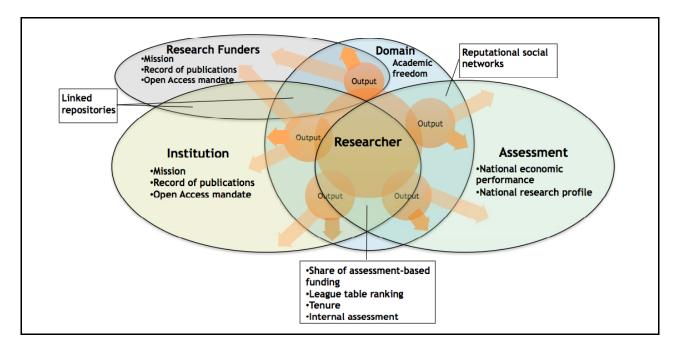
## Figure 1. Research Environments Model

*Assessment* takes place in most university systems worldwide, though not all of these apply formal assessment regimes like four of the five in our review. The assessment regime is characterised by governmental objectives to assist national economic performance through improving the research profile of a nation. The assessment environment overlaps substantially with the environment of the institution. Institutions will develop local systems to meet national assessment regimes in order to maximise their share of assessment-based funding where it is available. They are also increasingly conscious of how published research assessment scores can be applied by the compilers of university league tables—both national and international. Even in countries without national assessment regimes, such as Ireland, institutions often apply Web-based research information management systems in order to create more streamlined processes for internal research assessment and to allow high-level views of research performance. The tenure system—still relatively strong in some countries like the Netherlands—represents another area of overlap between these environments.

A number of social Web tools are now being used by many researchers worldwide to allow them—by volunteering their data—both to represent their outputs and to benchmark themselves within their own domain. An interesting recent example is Mendeley Research Networks[3] which is developing fast and manages the record of researchers' outputs within an informal but instantly useful global reputational context.

Libraries need to understand each of these environments, and how they affect the needs and behaviours of researchers. Libraries are involved, or could be involved, in supplying and engineering services to facilitate the processes of research in the full array of environments. Their service offerings will only be accepted if they help researchers negotiate the environments that surround them. The relative impact of these environments will vary by discipline and across cultures, countries and institutions. Libraries must be aware of these environments and the way they operate as sources of pressure upon researchers, as well as providers of benefit to them in their research and their careers.

## National priorities: assessment or excellence?

It is reasonable that the bodies that fund universities should wish to assess the performance of the research that they pay for in order to judge the return on their investment. The five countries in the review are all examples of national systems of predominantly publicly funded universities. In an increasingly competitive and knowledge-based global economy, governments look to universities as drivers of economic progress. Research assessment in such regimes therefore tends to go further than simply seeking to assure a reasonable return on investment, to the engineering of national systems that concentrate research excellence in order to maximise national economic performance. This economic role for universities has become much more prominent than it used to be, and is still often contested even by university leaders.[4] Our review found evidence that assessment regimes were causing perturbations in scholarly development trends that most research librarians would consider unhealthy. In some cases Open Access initiatives are being slowed down or halted. Researchers in certain disciplines are showing reluctance to start new journals or write new monographs[5] even when their disciplines would be likely to gain from them. Gradually, however, the academy seems to be accepting the idea that it has a stake in the prosperity of its regions. Andrea Sironi, Vice Rector of Internationalization, Università Bocconi, considered this question in an article written in 2007 entitled 'European Universities Should Try to Conquer the World,'[6] in which he talks about the need for Europe to challenge the US dominance of the global higher education market:

> The US system, based on a variety of funding sources available to universities, and on light government regulation in terms of programs and access to academic career, has been dominating world rankings and has functioned as a potent magnet for world talent and skills. … European systems seem unable to focus resources on the reduced number of institutions able to carry out research efforts and strive for excellence. In Europe, on paper there are 2,000 universities focusing in theory on research and competing for people and funding. By comparison, in the US … less than a hundred … are officially considered "research intensive universities".

This generalisation about European universities masks considerable differentiation between countries, as the four European countries in the review demonstrate. In the UK, the process that has led to increasing research concentration across the country began 23 years ago with its first national

research assessment exercise. The UK has the most overtly selective research funding system in the world:

> One obvious explanation for the relatively high showing of UK universities in the league tables is that its research funding is much more heavily concentrated on the top institutions than elsewhere in Europe. Well over three-fifths of public and business investment in university research in England is directed to the top 15 universities.[7]

The most recent UK assessment, for example, in 2008, resulted in over £1.5b per annum being divided up according to the results of an assessment process which took several years to conduct. As with previous exercises, the results created winners and losers, maintaining the pressure on those universities that had done well in the past to continue to do so, and increasing the pressure on many universities to try to improve their research profiles. The logic of concentration does mean, however, that for many their chances of gaining more from the outcome than would be spent in obtaining it are so slim that they have little incentive to get involved. But the effect upon university managers in research-intensive universities, including librarians, has been to apply constant pressure to improve competitiveness. Those who do well from the exercise in turn create a more competitive country within the international economic sphere, creating a "win-win" result for the country as a whole, but at the cost of enormous pressure, and—many would argue—stress upon the core values of higher education.

We deliberately excluded the US from this study, despite its position as the top nation in international comparisons of research strengths, mainly because of the difference in the funding environment. Its mix of public and private universities sets it apart from many countries, and its understanding of what constitutes a "publicly-funded" university is significantly different from the one that obtains in the five countries we studied. There is no national research assessment regime in the US, though there is undoubtedly a high degree of competition within the system. Tenure still features strongly in research universities, and systems for recording research and supporting the assessment of research performance at an institutional level are common and often very advanced. The US higher education system has sorted itself into a hierarchy that concentrates research excellence even without a government-incentivised system. The best-known producer of university rankings, *US News & World Report*, asserts that there are currently 262 "national universities" which " ... offer a full range of undergraduate majors, as well as master's and doctoral degrees; many strongly emphasize research."[8]

# Key findings by country

The Review finds that the assessment regimes in place in these five countries exhibit various characteristics that differentiate them. Some of the most notable of these are given briefly below, but please read the full review for detailed accounts.

**The Dutch system** gives a strong role to self-assessment, with a very high workload managed largely by academic departments. It also has in place a national system for recording research output. The Netherlands has been culturally averse to the idea of re-engineering concentration within the university research system to serve national economic ends, although there are signs that this may be changing, along with an increasing awareness of the negative impact their traditional approach to assessment and tenure may have on international competitiveness. It can also have a negative impact on individual researchers, who want to secure and demonstrate their reputation. Dutch university library services still operate a relatively diffuse and decentralised model. The department-led form of assessment has not allowed libraries to take on a strategically important role in the process, nor has the Netherlands taken full advantage of its national information management infrastructure - which could be useful in assessment.

**Ireland's universities** are interested in the regimes in place elsewhere, but a system is still lacking in Ireland itself, which in other respects has a well-developed and closely integrated research infrastructure and is acutely sensitive to international competition. Recent government funding cuts have led to a call for a national research assessment regime to provide evidence of the value of the investment and to shield against future cuts.

What makes **the UK system** stand out is the boldness with which it distributes a large proportion of the national budget for research—essentially all of the recurrent funding for research in the university system—through the research assessment process. Despite the cost and administrative burden, the study found that the UK's research assessment exercise is broadly supported by the academy. Recently, there has been debate about whether a more bibliometrics-based approach—which acknowledged differences among disciplines—could "lighten" the process and make it less expensive, but consultation and a pilot study have resulted in that suggestion being largely abandoned (and at the time of writing, the focus of controversy has shifted to the proposed weight to be given to economic impact). There is also concern about the current approach entrenching the status quo of publisher-manipulated high impact journals. There is some call for discipline-specific

interpretation of assessment requirements, and some researchers have added this to the list of functions they would like to see performed by subject librarians—requesting a subject librarian for every discipline on campus. The presence of institutional repositories in the latest assessment exercise led to more librarian involvement, albeit rather late in the process.

**In Denmark** a national research assessment regime recently replaced a system of voluntary internal assessment. The new regime is characterised by overt use of bibliometrics, using "publication channels" (a ranking of journals, monograph publishers and other output venues) to allocate points to researchers. The system is highly quantitative, creating simplicity and cost-efficiency. Librarians are seen as the obvious source of bibliometrics expertise. The report does suggest, however, that metrics-based approaches are too open to challenge to be used when large sums of money are at issue. Since the Danish system is said to be moving in the direction of linking assessment to funding, the metrics basis may not survive.

**Australia** was influenced by the UK in developing its assessment regime. A change of government prevented the Australian system from being tied to funding, as had been proposed, but there are recent signals that this is about to change. Australia is also introducing a journal rankings system. The first national assessment regime—which was never implemented—was developed after Australian university libraries had established a network of institutional repositories. This resulted in libraries being built in to the assessment culture at a strategic level.

# Recommendations

Based upon the Review and other work in which we are engaged, we would suggest that there are a number of ways in which research libraries can assist the processes of research assessment. Most of these apply at the local level, but benefits of scale surface in these recommendations as well.

1. **Libraries should be sources of knowledge on disciplinary norms and practices in research outputs for their institutions.** Libraries are well-placed to take a system-wide view across the environment of scholarly outputs. Every discipline has its own characteristic forms of output—including peer-reviewed articles, monographs, working papers, conference papers and specialist journals of various types. Research libraries serve scholarship and knowledge broadly and over time, and the collecting instincts of librarians and archivists are tuned to this diversity of outputs.

2. **Libraries should seek to sustain environments in which disciplines can develop while co-existing with political constraints.** A balance needs to be struck between research for disciplinary progress and research for national economic progress. There is some evidence that librarians can represent or be a lobbying force for the good of scholarship generally while recognising the reality of the constraints upon it imposed by funding, cultural and political systems. Their non-identification with particular disciplines and long acquaintance with and understanding of disciplinary literatures and behaviours equips them to advise on best practice. They should be alert to potentially harmful changes in practice which might be artificially induced by the exigencies of research assessment regimes, and draw attention to them.

3. **Libraries should manage research outputs data at national and international scales.** While research assessment systems require data from a range of other players throughout the institution (e.g., grant finance data, student numbers, etc.), the fact that research outputs play a central part means that libraries should seek a strong role in the management of these systems. They should do all they can to help make the existing processes for research assessment within their institutions—and within their countries—more efficient. While it is obviously in a library's interest for its institution to do well in research assessment exercises, the contribution of institutions to national reputation is also of growing importance.

4.  **Libraries should take responsibility for the efficient operation of research output repositories across research environments.** Working both within their institutions and collaboratively, they should play a leading role in developing and maintaining the repository machinery which operates across the array of research environments, ensuring efficient articulation and effective supply of metadata and content at the network level.

5.  **Libraries should provide expertise in bibliometrics.** Several research assessment regimes incorporate bibliometric measures to a significant degree. Even in those where they play a minimal role, there is a need for authoritative information to faculty on the various measures that exist to express relative performance by individual faculty and the journals and other publication venues in which their outputs are published. Libraries should establish their role not simply as providers of access to research outputs, but as curators of that portion which is provided by their own institution, and as sources of bibliometric information and interpretation for their institutions.

6.  **Libraries should provide usage evidence.** They should consider how they could provide more data to the mix that might help the system to become fairer. There are "'library metrics" that might be employed in assessment regimes (e.g., in the areas of holdings, circulation or e-resource usage data). At institutional and aggregated levels, libraries can offer data that might usefully complement the citations-based data that tend to dominate assessment processes.

7.  **Libraries should claim their territory.** They should be more assertive about what they can bring to research assessment operations on the campus. They must ensure that they have a voice in the planning of institutional responses to assessment and avoid the requirement to play a merely reactive or largely clerical role. This requires energetic library leadership and skills in relationship building both with academic departments and with research administration units.

# Notes

[1] Key Perspectives Ltd. 2009. *A Comparative Review of Research Assessment Regimes in Five Countries and the Role of Libraries in the Research Assessment Process*. Report commissioned by OCLC Research. Published online at:
http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2009/2009-09.pdf.

[2] Dempsey, Lorcan. 2007. "The network reconfigures the library." *Lorcan Dempsey's Weblog*. July 6, 2007. Published online at: http://orweblog.oclc.org/archives/001379.html.

[3] Mendeley Research Networks. 2009. Academic Software for Research Papers. [Web site.]
http://www.mendeley.com/.

[4] See, for example, Schartz, Steven. 2009. "Re-moralizing the University." *University World News*, 0096 (11 October). Available online at:
http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20091009231723191.

[5] This behaviour was also evidenced in a recent report:
Research Information Network and JISC. 2009. *Communicating Knowledge: How and Why UK Researchers Publish and Disseminate their Findings*. (September). Available online at:
http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/sarah/Communicating-knowledge-report.pdf.
It is clear from this work, too, that the pressure to publish in particular venues and forms comes both from the assessment exercise and from the way the institution calculates its maximum advantage. Institutions will often be less liberal in what they allow than the assessment exercise is in its own guidelines.

[6] Sironi, Andrea. 2007. "European Universities Should Try to Conquer the World." Università Bocconi Web site, April 16. Available online at:
http://www.virtualbocconi.com/Articoli/European_Universities_Should_Try_to_Conquer_the_World/default.aspx.

[7] Lambert, Richard and Nick Butler. 2006. *The Future of European Universities: Renaissance or Decay?* Centre for European Reform. Available online at:
http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/p_67x_universities_decay_3.pdf.

[8] Morse, Robert. 2009. "Methodology: Ranking Category Definitions: How we Differentiate Colleges and Universities." U.S. News and World Report Web site. (Posted August 19.) Available online at:
http://www.usnews.com/articles/education/best-colleges/2009/08/19/methodology-ranking-category-definitions.html.