

d'Evaluation de la Recherche et de l'Enseignement Supérieur). During the same period, the two candidates to the French presidency promised to increase considerably the budgets for universities and research and to transform universities into major actors of the French higher education system.

In these favorable institutional settings, the LRU was passed four months after Nicolas Sarkozy's election. By January 2009, 20 universities implemented the new act and became responsible for all their budgets, including salaries. All other universities were to do the same within the five subsequent years.

#### THE JACOBINS REGAINED INFLUENCE

While many people assumed the turn toward more institutional autonomy had been obtained, a combination of factors allowed a revolutionary Jacobin front to coagulate against these reforms. Within a few months, the context described above changed dramatically. Four events in particular provoked demonstrations and contestation that forced the French minister to accept some backtrackings. First, during the fall of 2008 a decree was prepared to transform the rules regulating the French academic corps since 1984, to empower French universities and their presidents in the management of the academic staff, but this provoked fears. The decree, for instance, introduced the possibility to reduce teaching duties for academics involved in research activities but did not say a word about academics strongly involved in teaching. Yet, French universities

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are open to all baccalaureat holders and thus have to face strong pedagogical issues. Second, the ministry launched a reform of the training of secondary school teachers, which was immediately severely contested by academics involved in these training programs and by the students attending them.

A student-academic coalition against the reforms thus became possible and started to be active. Third, about the same moment, in the allocation of the 2009 university budgets, a new budgetary process was introduced that led to cuts in some universities, while the ministry claimed for months that the French higher education and research budgets have never been so high. Furthermore, cuts in the number of positions were implemented to participate in the general policy aimed at reducing the number of civil-servant positions. While the cuts in higher education were far from respecting the rule of "one post left for two retirements," which applies to the French state administration, this policy change was nevertheless cruelly

resented by the universities and university presidents who feared it would be the drop that breaks the camel's back. But, fourth, the drop came from elsewhere: on January 22, 2009, President Sarkozy provided a discourse in which he fustigated the French research production and used rather derogatory terms. This pronouncement brought onto the streets all those who were against the decree and/or the reform of high school teachers' training, and/or the cuts, and/or the LRU, and/or the reform of the research system, and /or Sarkozy.

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At that very moment, a bizarre coalition took place between the left-wing unions of academics and the right-wing law professors who all fought against the decree that would have allowed the universities to manage their academic staffs. Both groups pleaded for giving the CNU—the central national body involved in the management of academic careers since the 19th century (but which had less and less power since 1992)—the responsibility, every four years, to assess the research, teaching, and service activities of the 63,000 academics—*maîtres de conférences* and professors. The latest version of the decree adopted in late April restrains the scope of decision for universities in the management of their staff.

The concrete implementation of the decree as well as the capacity of university presidents in informally expanding their formal prerogatives will of course be decisive for French universities to become more autonomous, if further restrictions are not obtained by the still ongoing contestations. ■

## The Impact of the UK Research Assessment Exercise

MICHAEL SHATTOCK

*Michael Shattock is visiting professor at the Institute of Education, University of London. E-mail: shattock@he.u-net.com.*

The results of the latest, and probably the last, Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom were announced in December 2008, and the financial outcomes for universities were confirmed in March 2009. Each of the previous RAEs (1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001) have cited winners

and losers. This year, in addition to the usual concerns about the ranking of individual disciplines, the controversy has intensified over the translation of the RAE results into financial allocations.

### A RESTRUCTURING DEVICE

It is important to recognize that in the United Kingdom the RAE is not, as national research assessments are in some other countries, an exercise associated with quality assurance carrying reputational consequences only. It is a resource allocation device that determines the institutional recurrent grant contribution to the dual funding system for research—the “R” element in the block grant (about 20% of the whole) and funding awarded by the research councils for individual research projects. The RAE was introduced in 1985/86, following a Cabinet Office review of funding for research and development across all government departments. This assessment program quickly became, however, a key restructuring device within the university system, identifying (and rewarding, financially) universities successful in research and penalizing less successful ones. With the results incorporated into league tables, the RAE conveyed reputational advantage (“the research intensive university”) as well as benefits over time in research concentration. The 1992 RAE coincided with the legislation abolishing the binary line between universities and polytechnics and served to confirm a systemic hierarchy with the post-1992 universities ranked below any of the pre-1992 institutions.

### THE RAE METHODOLOGY

Behind the broad principles of research funding, intense controversies have risen about the methodology of measuring research excellence. From the beginning, the RAE has ranked disciplines, not institutions. The institutional rankings and the financial allocations have been derived from the aggregation of subject rankings. The rankings have been undertaken by peer-group subject panels based on institutional submissions. These submissions, discipline by discipline, include research outputs (mostly not more than four publications per individual academic and listed so that the panel can consult them), a description of the research environment (research grants, number of research postgraduates, etc.), and indicators of esteem.

The particular details and the weightings have varied from RAE to RAE. In the early RAEs the presumption was that universities would submit almost 100 percent of their academic staff in the expectation of attracting higher financial allocations. However, as successive resource allocation models delivered less for lower scores, universities have reduced their lists to high-performing staff only. This emphasizes the extent to which “game playing” has developed. Thus, in 2008 Manchester University achieved sixth place in the multifaculty university ranking list by submitting only 75 percent of its eligible staff when most of its peers in the top 10 submitted around 90 percent. The RAE has been constantly criticized for

encouraging head hunting (“poaching”) of research stars to win RAE inclusion (with the inevitable inflationary impact on academic rank and salary), although statistically based inquiry has suggested that gossip may have greatly exaggerated the actual transfers.

The RAE has become not just a piece of restructuring machinery but also a major cultural phenomenon of the UK higher education system. Academics' publication rates may be planned around RAE cycles. Staff are recruited for their RAE potential. Institutional prestige is tied to RAE success, and highly ranked departments are magnets for research students. Membership of RAE panels represent an individual reputational ranking, while exclusion from an RAE submission in a research-active institution form an academic death warrant or, at least, a condemnation to a high teaching load. The publication of the RAE results can represent a defining point in the career of a vice-chancellor, pro-vice-chancellor (for research), or head of department.

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### THE 2008 RAE

An element of predictability had invaded the RAE by 2007/08, which is why the results of its 2008 assessments have provoked surprise and much debate. Instead of the previous seven-point scale, the 2008 RAE adopted a five-point ranking: 4 star (world ranking), 3 star (internationally excellent but falls short of the highest standards of excellence), 2 star (recognized internationally), 1 star (recognized nationally), and unclassified. For the first time international scholars were invited, 50 in all, to join the assessment panels. Pertaining to the ranking, instead of summative ratings for each university, individual “quality profiles” of each discipline were to be identified and ranked. A “world-class” department would, theoretically, need everyone ranked 4 star—whereas in 2001 a 5-star department (then the highest grade) needed 50 percent of its staff rated as at “international standard”—but a generally non-research-active department with one or two 4-star performers would receive credit for their ranking.

In this way, pockets of excellence were recognized in a much more dispersed set of institutions than in previous RAEs. Due to the aggregated ratings, although the top 10 institutions—Cambridge, London School of Economics, Oxford, Imperial College, University College London, Manchester, Warwick, York, Essex, and Edinburgh (in that order)—did not differ markedly from previous RAEs, the table turned more

fluid with some universities moving up many places (Queen Mary University, London from 46th to 11th, Nottingham from 35th to 24th) and some others fell equally sharply. The pockets of excellence spread widely across the system, and three post-1992 universities (Hertfordshire, Brighton, and De Montfort) were for the first time ranked above some pre-1992 institutions.

These results raised serious funding issues. The government had always liked that the RAE methodology chimed with its policy of investment in and concentration of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) research to support national economic ambitions. This policy also helped maintain the United Kingdom's position in worldwide citation tables. For institutions concerned about the resource base, however, the major issues have revolved around the gradient of the reward structures for the different rankings and the size of the “pots of gold” allocated to each discipline. The greater dispersal of former pockets of excellence—the majority in non-STEM subjects—produced in a fixed budget a theoretical redistribution of funding away from the major centers of research concentration and drove a coach and horses through the gov-

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ernment's policy. Rumors of large cuts in high-ranked institutions abounded. To accommodate the difficulty, the size of the fixed sum had to be expanded, and a switch of funding into the STEM “pots of gold” had to be undertaken. Thus, in England, whereas in 2001 90 percent of the R funding was shared among 38 universities, the figure will be 48 in 2008—25 institutions receiving research funding for the first time. There have been significant winners and losers: in spite of their ranking, Imperial College has lost 5 percent of its R money and London School of Economics 13 percent (because of the switch of funding to STEM subjects); Nottingham, on the other hand, which is strong in STEM subjects, gained 23 percent.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE RAE

A compromise may have been achieved. The advocates of concentration can point to 75 percent of the funds going to 26 institutions only, with Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College, and University College London receiving more than 25 percent. However, the post-1992 universities in particular and many individuals in unfashionable institutions can claim to be vindicated in the exposure of a much greater spread of research talent than was apparent in the past. Nevertheless, the 2008 RAE has created aspirations that will be hard to meet. Another danger is that the new Research Excellence Framework, which is planned to succeed the RAE and will be

much more metrics based, will be more heavily steered by government and less likely to reward excellence wherever it is found. ■

## Vietnam's Strategy on Higher Education: The Hardware Needs Software

DENNIS C. MCCORNAC

*Dennis C. McCornac is associate professor of economics at Anne Arundel Community College, 101 College Parkway, Arnold, MD. E-mail: dmc-cornac@aacc.edu.*

Virtuous and talented men are state sustaining elements: The strength and the prosperity of a state depend on its vitality, and a state becomes weaker as such vitality fails. That is why all the Saint Emperors and clear-sighted Kings did not fail in seeing to the formation of men of talent and the employment of literati to develop this vitality.  
—Nien Hieu Dai Bao, 1442

If Vietnam is to achieve the lofty goals of the prophetic words quoted above and inscribed on a plaque hanging inside Hanoi's Temple of Literature, the first university in Vietnam and for centuries the principal center of learning, it is imperative that Vietnam establishes a high-quality, sustainable system of higher education if it desires to continue on its development path.

#### THE NEW STRATEGY

The recently released Draft Strategy for Education Development for 2009–2020 has set a number of goals for the Vietnamese education system. One of the main targets calls for the construction of four international standard universities, over the next decade, and to ensure that by 2020 at least two of these universities become among the 200 top universities in the world. These universities, estimated to cost US\$400 million to build and staff, will be interdisciplinary, providing high-quality education in both Vietnamese and English.

Another goal outlined in the draft is to have 450 university students per 10,000 people by 2020. This would be a dramatic increase from the current ratio of 180 per 10,000 persons and would require not only a tripling of the number of colleges and universities but a fourfold increase in the number of students.

Vast improvements must occur in the primary and secondary educational sectors to create a pipeline of students into higher education. The quality of higher education must be addressed and significantly improved to meet the objective of