

Summary of the Independent Review of the PBRF

What are the early effects of the Performance-Based Research Fund?

Purpose of the review

The review was undertaken to learn how well the PBRF is accomplishing its primary goal, to encourage and reward research excellence in the tertiary education sector. The PBRF is the largest pool of research funding for the tertiary education sector, has distributed \$664 million since its inception in 2002, and is anticipated to distribute a further \$1 billion through 2012. Evidence of its effectiveness is essential.

The review was to identify early effects of the new research funding system and any changes in New Zealand academic research that the PBRF appears to drive. It was also to consider how the PBRF processes might be improved.

How the review was conducted

The TEC contracted an international expert to conduct an independent strategic review of the PBRF. Dr. Jonathan Adams from Evidence Ltd in the UK came to New Zealand in early 2008 and conducted an extensive series of individual interviews, focus groups, and group interviews. He also collected written submissions from interested parties and reviewed a series of quantitative studies prepared by researchers at the TEC and Ministry of Education. Upon returning to the UK he prepared his report.

The review reflects the insight of a world expert with extensive experience evaluating similar research funding schemes in the UK and other European countries. The review's independence ensures an unmediated view of the effects of the PBRF.

How the report will be used

The TEC will use the report findings directly in its work to improve how the PBRF functions. The TEC has established a Sector Reference Group to review the design of the PBRF before the 2012 Quality Evaluation and suggest improvements. The report findings will guide and influence the group's work. The TEC Board and PBRF Steering Group will decide on any suggested changes and also consider comments and suggestions that are strategic in nature.

In the tertiary sector, researchers and institution leaders may also use the report to reflect on and consider changes to their research practices. In government, a range of organisations involved with and supporting tertiary sector research will review how the report findings may suggest enhancements to their own practices. The Minister for Tertiary Education has received the report and may consider its reflections on research funding levels and research policy aims

Key findings

A brief summary of the report's position on key issues.

The PBRF has been effective and would benefit from additional funding

1. "The PBRF is already delivering important and appropriate outcomes of significant economic, social and cultural benefit. It can sustain the process of change and fully achieve its objectives with modest modification if it is funded

at a level that responds to the growth of opportunity and activity that it has stimulated.”

2. “The PBRF has been effective in delivering beneficial outcomes in financial, reputational and formative terms.” It has directed funding more selectively to institutions delivering better research. It has increased the quantity and quality of information about relative research strength in New Zealand. It has also spurred improvements in the management and conduct of research.
3. “The government’s objectives for the PBRF are being met on most counts.”
4. “If the PBRF is to achieve its goals then the broader role of research in the New Zealand economy should be re-examined.” Further economic support of research, and not only in the context of the PBRF, would ensure that the gains being created are absorbed and embraced within New Zealand.

Strengths of the PBRF to protect

1. PBRF must remain focused on identifying and funding research excellence. Avoid adding potentially conflicting goals to its mandate such as prioritising utility or commercial value, promoting innovation or developing basic research capability at institutions whose research base is not yet well established.
2. Its primary benefit to New Zealand is that it is an investment in people – in creating the kinds of TEOs that produce very highly-skilled graduates, people “trained in finding and using knowledge to solve problems, people who can do all sorts of things all over the economy.” The focus on research excellence produces this result.
3. The PBRF is basically equitable. It does have a core model of research and excellence that is more western and science-focused, and research in modes that are distant from this core may fare slightly less well, however this is addressable through minor improvements in panel processes.

Improvements to consider

1. Alter panel membership, training, deliberation time and practices to improve the breadth and depth of the quality assessment.
2. Better-recognise applied research and research with applied outputs such as reports for external bodies.
3. Restrict staff eligibility to a core group of more closely-defined permanent academic staff who represent principal investigators.
4. Shift the unit of assessment from the individual to the group after 2012.
5. Dissociate scores from staff names. Making individual scores available “undermines proper staff development processes in some institutions” and leads to some TEOs inappropriately using the PBRF as a staff-appraisal substitute.
6. Alter weightings in several ways to ensure continued emphasis on increasing quality. An “A” quality category could have stronger financial and scoring benefit compared to a “B” so that there is a clear benefit to raising staff to the highest level of excellence. Weightings for research degree completions might be reduced because they represent quantity rather than quality. Subject-area weightings should also be reviewed.

Next steps

1. To assist the Sector Reference Group in developing recommendations for improvements in the PBRF, contribute feedback to their consultation papers.