School of the Humanities and Social Sciences: Policy on Research Assessment

Adoption of CSAH Policy agreed by CSHSS [HSS.MT.23.03]

San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment | Research Strategy Office

As a signatory to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), the University of Cambridge is committed to fairness, rigour, and transparency in evaluating research for such purposes as recruitment, probation, and promotion.

Key Principles

The following general principles should be observed by all institutions within the School in drawing up policies or procedures that involve assessing the quality of research.

Transparency. The objectives, criteria, range of admissible evidence, methods, and interpretation of results in any assessment process should be set out explicitly for the guidance of assessors and of those submitting materials for assessment.

Integrity. Research quality should be the paramount criterion in research assessment, which should be conducted by impartial and appropriately trained or experienced assessors who have the necessary subject knowledge and competence to make qualitative judgements about the content of research outputs.

Fairness. All those subject to evaluation must be treated equally and impartially. Evaluation should consider only such material and information as is submitted for assessment in accordance with the guidance produced for the process in question.

Comprehensiveness. Evaluation should take appropriate account of different types or formats of research output (including materials in languages other than English). The guidance for any particular assessment process should explicitly encourage the submission of materials across the relevant range of formats. Any evidence to be used in the assessment process should permit fair and equal comparison between researchers and must be appropriate for the purposes of the evaluation. The limitations of any evidence or methods used must be considered.

Metrics

DORA offers specific guidance on the use of journal-level metrics in research assessment.

Journal-level indicators, including metrics such as the journal impact factor, or surrogates such as the journal title or publisher, should not be used as a proxy for the quality of an individual piece of published research.

Although in some fields particular journals or publishers are reasonably associated with outputs that are generally of high quality, the quality of an individual piece of research should never be inferred from the publication venue alone. The use of 'target journal' lists in recruitment, probation, and promotion processes is very strongly discouraged, and terms such as 'high impact journal' should be avoided in guidance documents (and advertisements). Terms such as 'high quality research' or 'influential research' should be preferred to the words 'impact' and 'impactful', which may be misinterpreted as denoting 'journal-impact factor'.

Any metrics used in research assessment must be explicitly allowed for in the guidance for the process.

Particular caution should be exercised in using metrics to assess research quality, especially when drawing comparisons between researchers. Citation-based metrics such as H- index or raw citation counts, if used, must also be used with caution, because they vary widely by discipline and specialism, and can favour more experienced researchers. If possible, field normalised citation counts should be employed rather than raw citation counts.

Increasingly, researchers highlight their research via measures such as the Altmetric Attention Score, an article-level measure that aims to capture broader interest in a piece of research. Assessors should be aware of the limitations of such measures and should use care and judgement when drawing comparisons between researchers.

There are situations in which the number of researchers and outputs to be evaluated is so high that the evaluation of all content would be unduly burdensome. When metrics are used to support evaluation in such situations, the guidance for the process should clearly set out the importance attached to any quantitative indicators used. The limitations of different metrics used must be clearly understood. Disciplinary differences must be taken into account in applying any quantitative publication metrics. The researchers being evaluated should, as far as possible, be able to check any data used and the results of any analyses of such data.

Range of research outputs / Comprehensiveness

Research assessment should take account, as appropriate, not only of peer-reviewed research papers, monographs or books, but also of patents, datasets, software, images, video recordings or compositions. Qualitative measures of research excellence, such as the effects of the research on policy, should also be considered. In accordance with the University's commitment to the Open Research agenda, contributions to promoting 'Open Research' should explicitly be part of the evaluation criteria where possible.[1]

Research quality may be indicated by the methods employed, data generated, development of theoretical frameworks, and the influence of the research on the development of the discipline or in influencing policy.

Alternative approaches to research assessment

Schools or Faculties may wish to consider adopting or adapting some of the following suggestions in designing their research assessment processes.

Normalised citation counts. Where article-level metrics are considered in the evaluation process, researchers should be instructed to include only Field Normalised Citation Impact figures, to allow fairer comparisons between researchers in different disciplines or at different stages of their careers. With citation-based metrics, assessors should be aware that these are influenced by the age of the outputs.

Narrative-based CVs. Narrative-based CVs, such as the Royal Society's Résumé for Researchers, aim to capture the full range of a person's research contributions. Narratives are already widely used in research assessment across the University, for example in evaluating research summaries or plans, and in probation and promotion processes. Although narrative elements come with their own biases (for example, they could privilege candidates with particular literary skills), and an exclusively narrative CV may not be deemed appropriate, consideration should be given to requesting narratives under suitable headings as a part of assessment processes, and to inviting applicants to include in their CVs an account of what they see as the importance of an appropriate subset of their outputs.

[1] https://osc.cam.ac.uk/open-research/open-research-position-statement