

What Is the Objective of the High Quality Research Act?

Author

Enago Academy

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What is the High Quality Research Act?

The ambiguously titled High Quality Research Act (HQRA) came into existence in April 2013 as proposed legislation by Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), the chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology. The bill would require the director of the National Science Foundation (NSF) to certify to the Committee in writing that every research grant funded by the agency meets a new set of criteria in addition to any established internal [peer review](#) criteria. The criteria proposed are as follows:

- [The research] is in the interests of the United States to advance the national health, prosperity, or welfare, and to secure the national defense by promoting the progress of science.
- Is the finest quality, is ground-breaking, and answers questions or solves problems that are of the utmost importance to society at large.
- Is not duplicative of other research projects being funded by the Foundation or other Federal Science agencies.

Targeting Basic Research

HQRA, as proposed, clearly favors [applied research over basic foundational research](#). The expectation that the NSF should prioritize funding to research that “answers questions or solves problems that of the utmost importance to society at large,” demonstrates a clear intent to direct funding towards research with practical outcomes. This may be an issue of financial efficacy in directing funding dollars to the projects with the best chance of a successful outcome, or as many research scientists have come to suspect, there is a darker agenda in which science will now be measured exclusively by [commercial performance metrics](#).

Lack of Understanding

The specific requirement of the third criterion that research projects not be “[duplicative](#)” has raised the greatest concern in the research community about a clear lack of comprehension on the part of a committee that is seeking to insert itself over an [established research process](#). To limit applied research to stand-alone projects rather than funding multiple teams to encourage multiple approaches demonstrates an alarming lack of knowledge of basic research methodology.

Political Review over Peer Review

To underline his focus on his version of “quality,” Smith requested further clarification from the Acting Director of the NSF, [Cora Marrett](#), about five specific research projects which Smith identified as failing to meet the NSF’s metric of “intellectual merit.” The fact that all five projects fell under Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences suggested a deliberate tactic on Smith’s part to avoid a data quality battle over the harder sciences. Marrett refused to comply with Smith’s request for further clarification on the grounds that such a request would compromise the confidentiality of the [peer review process](#).

Many research scientists are dismissing HRQA as lacking the administration support needed for it to pass. However, even as proposed legislation, the bill raises the specter of political review superseding peer review in the name of fiscal responsibility. Given that the NSF is spending the taxpayer’s money, some element of political involvement is inevitable, but to demand that the NSF forecast the usefulness of scientific breakthroughs in the future and then to turn those prognostications over to politicians (who are heavily dependent on campaign fundraising) for approval marks the beginning of a very slippery slope.

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