The assessment of research quality and accountability for research funding are major issues in higher education. This paper describes the British experience of nationwide research quality assessment exercises, and newly introduced measures intended to improve accountability. The consequences are examined, including those for the higher education system as a whole and for individual institutions, using the University of Glasgow as an example. Comprehensive peer review of research quality has demonstrated the usefulness of certain performance indicators. Their relevance for U.S. institutional researchers is discussed, and similarities with the measures used by the National Academy of Sciences in its assessment of research-doctorate programs are identified. The requirements of the U.S. Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) are noted.

Assessment, accountability, and the evaluation of program effectiveness are increasingly important to institutions of higher education throughout the world, to their constituents, and to those who support them. This paper considers the British experience of nationwide research quality assessment exercises and their consequences for both individual institutions and the higher education system as a whole.

Research effort in the United Kingdom forms only a small part of the world total. For example, in 1991, the U.K.’s share of world science papers was 8.6 percent (Institute for Scientific Information, 1992). The U.K. must use its scarce resources to best effect, if it is to compete internationally. The selective use of public funds to support high-quality research has been a recurrent theme in government thinking over many years. Accountability for the use of research funds is a further concern of government. An explicit commitment to wealth creation and the quality of life by more effective use of basic research is another recurrent theme, dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, and recently restated (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1993). The requirements for increased accountability and, more particularly, four-
yearly national assessments of research quality are sometimes considered to be symptoms of increasing government intrusiveness in university affairs, and they have had a profound impact on academic life in the U.K. in recent years.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE USE OF RESEARCH FUNDING

Since the mid-1980s, it has been the policy of the central higher education funding bodies in the U.K. to direct financial support to areas of research excellence, identified in regular national assessments of research quality. While each university has autonomy concerning the use of its central government appropriations, there is nonetheless an expectation that resources allocated on research-based criteria should be used primarily for research, rather than teaching, which is financed separately. Tension between the desire to provide some direction concerning the use of research funding, while not requiring research appropriations to be spent in each institution exactly as allocated by the central funding bodies, has led to an increased emphasis on the need for individual institutions to account for the ways in which they use research funds.

Various methods for such accounting have been considered (Coopers and Lybrand, 1993). A process was sought by government that would achieve better accountability for the use of public funds and assist institutional management by increasing awareness of the cost of research. It was also considered desirable to achieve better public (and parliamentary) understanding of what universities actually do.

It was recognized that a system in which institutions would be required annually to account for the use of research funds could have certain pitfalls. It was feared that the cost, in terms of academic time lost and antipathy aroused, could be such as to outweigh the benefits. Debate focused on whether accountability should be in terms of actual expenditure by institutions or in terms of the funds they allocate internally for research. The former solution was recognized as necessitating a diary exercise as a means of determining the extent to which each individual faculty member spent her or his time on research activities. The allocation model was the one that was adopted, because it is less burdensome. Institutions now report once a year on how they intend to allocate research appropriations among subject groupings.

EXERCISE

In addition to requiring accountability for the uses of research funds, the government has conducted three national assessments of the quality of research in the U.K.—in 1986, 1989, and 1992—to provide a standard rating of research programs in order to increase selectivity in the allocation of central government funding. Each exercise has been more refined than the previous one. Institutions