

## **Response to the Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment From the University of Brighton**

The University of Brighton recognises the importance at this early stage of assisting the Committee in its work by providing selective rather than comprehensive comment. Our response focuses on a number of key points, adding a number of issues to the Committee's list for consideration rather than seeking to pre-judge the detailed analysis of options that will be done over the next few months.

The University would therefore like to offer the following key points:

### **1 General Approach**

- 1.1 Our conclusion is that peer and/or expert review, or some form of qualitative judgement, will inevitably be at the centre of any process. Even if a more 'robust' form of algorithm were invented it would be likely to make great use of data relating to leading journal publication and research council success (where, in both cases, peer review lies at the heart of the decision-making processes). The notion of peer review is integral to the review process and whereas there may be some merit in seeking external reviewers who are not themselves involved in UK University research, it is difficult to envisage where they might be found in sufficient numbers to enable a wholly 'external' process to be implemented.
- 1.2 The University believes that there may be some merit in some element of self-assessment, although we recognise that it would be necessary to validate this externally.
- 1.3 We believe that there may be some merit in consideration of an institution's holistic achievement in research, although any such consideration must recognise differing levels of quality and it is not appropriate that a single denominator would be the result. We believe however, that Universities should be allowed to present overviews to their submissions and to draw links between the subjects.
- 1.4 The University wishes to keep an open mind regarding the issue of holding reviews of research on a rolling basis (as exemplified by QAA processes), although clearly development of any such system would have to take account of the dangers of the perpetual volatility of funding outcomes.
- 1.5 We believe that depending on the process, there may be some merit in an institutional visit since it would give reviewers the opportunity to fully understand new and distinctive profiles.

### **2 Criteria**

- 2.1 The notion of the quality of the science, the scholarship or the creative practice should remain central. Other criteria may, however, be of equal value. The articulation of the research to meet different forms of application (professional practice, product development, social need etc.) may also be of more importance than the recent RAE allowed.
- 2.2 The University believes that institutions should be able to submit only those staff which it deems to be research active since submitting staff who are non-research active is counter to the point of selective funding.
- 2.3 Ideally any system should assume the availability of an amount of funds (perhaps 20% of the whole) allocated on a pro-rata (for example, student number by proxy as in 1986/1989 RAEs) basis to all HEFCE funded HEIs with research degree awarding powers. This would be sufficient to allow headroom for new developments and new subjects (as in the case, for example, of new Medical Schools). If funding is likely to be unavailable for this, then some allowance for this need should be built into the parameters of the assessment system.
- 2.4 Any system should not have the effect of:
  - a) artificially encouraging inflation of research student and staff numbers;
  - b) discouraging the positive valuing of the contributions of research active staff nearing retirement (for example, those who, in post in 1996, were known to be retiring before April 2001). This is an important message to give now (especially if no further research assessment is to take place until 2007 or 2008).

2.5 We strongly support the notion that measures should continue to be world class. However, in relation to some disciplines (for example, Education, Business, Social Policy), there have been some difficulties caused by the terms 'international', 'national' and 'subnational', and there should be no a priori assumptions made in relation to the scientific merit of work which is regional or local in scope. Often such work is indeed capable of much wider application, for example in a comparative or cumulative context together with similar work in other regions or countries.

### 3 Research and Teaching

3.1 If it is judged (as this University does) that, with proper management, the presence of active research is strongly beneficial to teaching, then it is perverse for an HE Funding Council not to take this into account. At present HEIs are strongly encouraged to show how their different strategies (for example, Learning and Teaching, Widening Participation, Estates) are linked together and how expenditure plans relating to them are mutually reinforcing. However the RAE criteria actively discouraged HEIs from making explicit how their research, and their management of this research, add value for teaching. Within RAE 2001 to argue that research had value because it contributed to knowledge transfer through teaching was perceived as a negative proposition. This is surely nonsensical in terms of HEFCE's overall strategic aims and should be reversed in any future system of research assessment.

3.2 This issue particularly affects the position and development of PGRs. In reality the great majority of future HEI teaching staff are drawn from the ranks of these PGRs; their existence, development and training (if it takes place) are perhaps the single most important factor in the quality of the teaching in UKHE. However at present the quality assessment and funding models for Research and Teaching are such that any integrated attempts to address their needs across Research and Teaching boundaries are actively discouraged. For example, to argue in RAE 2001 for the importance of research students on the grounds that an institution was developing the future generation of university teachers would have been regarded as, at best, irrelevant and, at worse, negative.

### 4 Additional comments

4.1 Discussion within the University has shown that concerns arising from the recent RAE include:

- i) that the impression is that many international reviewers were confused about their role in the process due to minimal training and unfamiliarity with the criteria employed by the RAE;
- ii) that RAE 2001 did not seem to take account of: new and developing staff; those with a high administrative or teaching workload; staff who had taken a career break or those who through having a background in professional practice have had different development experience. Therefore consideration should be given to identifying these different staff categories. In addition, it may be worth considering including recognition of the importance of other staff who contribute to research such as technical staff;
- iii) that limiting the number of outputs per individual did not give a realistic view of the research in the whole department. One method of solving this could have been to limit outputs by Unit of Assessment according to the number of staff submitted, rather than relating it specifically to individual members of staff;
- iv) that RAE 2001 looked back at what had been achieved over the last 5 years. It is hoped that any future exercise, could place greater emphasis on future potential. Panels should assess the quality of staff in place and the future potential they hold, clearly identifying groups which are developing, those that are stagnating and those in decline;
- v) that the feedback given to the University in RAE 2001 was much appreciated and that the University believes that further steps could be taken in this direction. The University of Brighton would welcome the opportunity to contribute ideas as to how this could be achieved at a later stage;
- vii) that one of the failings of the last RAE was the inability to adequately judge interdisciplinary research. Since many of the world's problems are going to be solved by such research, any

future research assessment must look at the best way of promoting this activity and ensuring that it is going to be supported and developed in the future.