

CONTRIBUTION BY CARDIFF UNIVERSITY TO THE JOINT FUNDING BODIES' REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

1. Context

As a member of its Research Policy Strategy Group, our Vice-Chancellor, Dr. David Grant, has contributed significantly to Universities UK's response to the research assessment review. Cardiff University's views are reflected closely in that response and you will note similarities in what is presented here. However, on the issue of 'timing of research assessment' we wish to state, at the outset, that we reject any proposals to introduce a rolling assessment process. Our views on this are explored further below.

Our response has been compiled following consultation with academic departments and issues raised were discussed during a recent University Research Committee meeting. We have also drawn upon the expertise of our thirteen RAE 2001 panel members regarding the processes adopted during that Exercise.

Cardiff University recognises that the review will focus on the assessment process only (as emphasised by Sir Gareth Roberts in his article in *The Higher* on 15 November 2002). However, we do feel that it is virtually impossible to consider assessment in isolation of funding given that the purpose of the former is, and should remain being, to inform the allocation of the latter. We recognise that funding outcomes resulting from RAE 2001 have differed significantly between the Funding Councils and, as has warranted great media attention recently, that resourcing of HE generally requires urgent attention. We feel that the Review Group will have to take such issues into account during its deliberations.

2. Observations of RAE Achievement

In all related assessment and funding reviews over the years Cardiff University has been keen to emphasise that our experience of the RAE is extremely positive. We recognise that the Exercise has led to demonstrable improvements, nationally, in research quality and productivity and in heightening research culture. Universities have adopted a more strategic approach to research management leading to, for example, the development of more effective research teams, enhanced research infrastructure and research-led teaching. We also recognise that there is a strong positive correlation between improvements in RAE grading and teaching quality assessment to the benefit of undergraduate and postgraduate students. We do not, therefore, concur with the view that research funding and assessment methods weaken research-led teaching - in fact, our experience indicates that the reverse is true.

We note the statistics quoted by UUK which show that with 1% of the world's population the UK is producing 5% of the world's science, 9% of the world's scientific citations are attributed to UK produced papers and UK scientists are winning 10% of the leading international science prizes. At least some of this improved performance must arise from better management of research in the universities and a greater focus and profile for research excellence deriving from the discipline imposed by assessment.

The demonstration of improvement in research performance and capability that the RAE provides has allowed institutions to compete more effectively for externally funded research grants and contracts. RAE grading has become an internationally accepted standard which facilitates easier acceptance, by other (non-Funding Council) funders, of research achievements and capabilities. Such acceptance of the RAE grade as a "kitemark" of research quality speaks well for the acceptability of the assessment process to the external audience. For Cardiff the demonstration of

improved quality provided by RAE has enhanced researchers' ability to gain research awards from the UK Research Councils, an area where HEIs in Wales have not performed well in the past, but also from a broad range of industrial and commercial sources.

Cardiff University is aware of the allegations and criticisms that have been levelled at the RAE. We are sure that the Review Group will consider carefully the underlying evidence for and relevance of these concerns, and move forward from an evidence base garnered from examples of real and not perceived practice. We note the many concerns surrounding the treatment of interdisciplinary research for example. It will be important that the measures and processes introduced in RAE 2001, for example Umbrella Panels and cross-referencing of submissions, are properly evaluated to assess their impact on actual examples of interdisciplinary returns. Moving to a smaller number of panels (as below) could also help break down any perceived barriers. It may often be the case that perception rather than reality dictates many of the criticisms of the RAE and this Review is to be welcomed if it establishes a firm evidence base for moving forward.

RAE 2001 results showed great improvement across the board. We do not concur with views being put forward that these achievements can be attributed to grade drift or 'gamemanship' but, instead, suggest that they provide strong evidence of the impact of the RAE as a recognised tool for measuring research performance. Our response focuses on the means by which the RAE should be continued, albeit with some modification.

In summary, Cardiff University:

- i) favours a retention of the current research assessment system albeit with a lighter touch;
- ii) has general confidence in the judgement of the panels and in the integrity of the system;
- iii) is keen to ensure that assessment continues to emphasise quality of output; and;
- iv) would like to be able to monitor progress across successive RAEs and therefore favours maintaining the same metrics and standards.

3. Expert review

A major strength of the RAE has been its focus on peer review, with panels making professional judgements both on research performance and potential for the future. Peer review should be maintained for future Exercises. Further thought will need to be given to the role of 'international assessors' as, we understand, the contribution from these (and understanding of what they were meant to do) varied widely across panels in 2001.

Assessors should continue to make reference to a range of metrics but we recognise that the most important of these has been, and should continue to be, (quality of) research outputs (RA2). The observation has been made that in RAE 2001 other sections of RAE submissions were virtually ignored, or had little part to play in the panel's decisions. In recognition that *'ultimate responsibility for decisions rests with them [expert reviewers]'*, greater thought should be given, in advance of each Exercise, by panels to the metrics that are important to their particular discipline. For some it may be virtually meaningless for HEIs to provide them with quantitative metrics such as research income data or to provide textual commentary. This may result in very different submissions across subject areas, but would also reduce the administrative burden of having to provide information/ data that has little direct relevance for the research area being assessed.

Although we can recognise that there may be benefits, in terms of lessening administrative burden, by combining assessment of teaching and research, we have not witnessed any support within the University to this suggestion. The University is keen to emphasise that improvements in research do correlate with improved research-led teaching. However, we would not wish to see anything as onerous as a QAA review process being superimposed on to the RAE.

Cardiff University feels that research assessment needs to be largely retrospective (to acknowledge/ reward achievement) but that, particularly where more junior members of staff are concerned, judgements on prospective achievements should also be made. The focus of assessment should be made at individual, group and departmental level (panels may differ in their foci based on discipline norms).

Cardiff University supports the current assessment based around subjects or thematic areas, with due attention being given before each Exercise to emerging research areas. We recommend that thought be given to having fewer panels (eg a single Mathematics panel and a single Engineering panel), with a broader spread of research interests, in the future. Such a move could help deal with anxieties about the treatment of interdisciplinary research and reduce opportunity for disparities between panel practices and gradings.

A major strength of preserving the current structure is that comparisons on quality of research over time can be judged.

4. Algorithm

Cardiff University feels strongly that an 'automatic' algorithm to assess research quality should not be progressed. Whilst there might be mileage for some science or engineering panels to use an algorithm as an element of their assessment, for some other disciplines (particularly arts and humanities) such quantitative/ mechanical methods are less likely to be of relevance. There is scope within the current RAE process for algorithms to be taken into account in the review process and many science and engineering panels make use of this.

Although the Review Group suggests a number of metrics that might be used, we would like to emphasise that there should not be an over-concentration on input measures (such as research income) in any research assessment. We feel strongly that emphasis should rest on the quality of research outputs. Furthermore, quality cannot simply be measured by reference to bibliometric measures - we feel that it remains important for all panels to read a proportion of the outputs cited in submissions if they are to be properly peer-reviewed.

5. Self-assessment

Cardiff University feels that the arguments lying behind proposals to increase self-assessment are rooted in a desire to reduce the administrative burden and cost of the RAE. However, it is likely that there would be suspicions that self-assessments would be inflated and substantial peer review (and 'policing') would be required, such that burden and cost are unlikely to be reduced in practice.

Strong elements of self-assessment already exist within the RAE process, which allows an institution to review its performance and be selective in the research it submits for assessment. Overall, we feel that the existing balance between self-assessment and peer/ expert review should be maintained.

6. Historical ratings

We concur with Universities UK that '*...a selective research assessment methodology must be aspirational and so facilitate change and development*'. Whilst 'track record' could be taken into account by panels it is unclear how recent research developments/ achievements could be adequately considered in an assessment which rested heavily on past assessment outcomes. Over-emphasis on historical ratings are likely to act against investment in emerging research areas. There would also be an inability to recognise any institutional failure/ inability to invest in research infrastructure and activity.

7. Cross-cutting Themes

What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?

Research assessment should be used to allocate research within disciplines based on proven (peer-reviewed) research excellence and to develop research capacity. As Universities UK points out its '*principles of transparency, equity and inclusivity, aspirational and accountability are specifically important*' as justifications for the need to assess (and to resource, based on its outcomes) the UK's research base.

How often should research be assessed?

Cardiff University rejects the concept of rolling assessment. There may be superficial attraction of introducing rolling assessment e.g. spreading the 'central' (Funding Council) effort over a longer period. However, institutionally, if well managed, a concentrated effort over a shorter period of time can be a much more efficient use of resource. Any rolling programme would necessitate permanent RAE support teams in every University. Experience of teaching quality assessment points to the constant and relentless drain this proves to be upon administrative resources, and the scope for constant revisions to the system means that results are not directly comparable between reviews. Review every 5 – 6 years for all subjects at the same time is our preferred option.

What is excellence in research?

Excellent research is research that changes and sets agendas, challenges assumptions and provides evidence to shift thinking and practice. Research excellence can be defined pragmatically as research that is published in the world's leading journals/ by major publishers in each discipline. Most academic communities have a clear idea about the identity of such media.

(This comment should be read in conjunction to one made above, i.e. that peer reviewers will still need to read a proportion of the cited outputs to ensure that perceptions of quality are valid.)

Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?

Research assessment should continue to determine the proportion of available funding directed towards each subject. As previously emphasised we are convinced that it will prove impossible to separate the current review process from its purpose, i.e. to inform funding.

Should each institution/ subject/ group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?

Each institution, and each group of cognate subjects, should be assessed in the same way. However, due regard should be given to the diversity of each institution's mission and strategy.

How can a research assessment process be designed to support equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education?

RAE 2001 criteria went a long way towards eradicating discrimination against younger researchers and gave opportunity to explain instances when staff submitted

fewer than four outputs (e.g. due to absences during the RAE period such as maternity leave). We do not feel that the RAE process itself, in its current form, contributes towards discriminating towards any group. Perhaps the issue to be addressed is the behaviour of individual institutions/ departments and their management styles. This is not a matter for the research assessment process or the Review Group. The process employed simply needs to ensure that when individual circumstances over the review period are different, there is opportunity to describe and allow for these.

However, classification of staff eligible, by nature of their contracts, for inclusion in the RAE does warrant attention and it may be here that process design can be adjusted to guard against unwanted discriminatory outcomes. Use in past RAEs of (HESA) guidelines designed for other purposes, resulted in some curious outcomes. Staff on teaching-only contracts with no research obligations were automatically eligible for inclusion and then had to be classified "inactive". However, the vast majority of staff on research-only contracts could not satisfy the conditions of 'independence' allowing them to be submitted in their own right and thus though clearly research active were ineligible for submission.

Priorities: what are the most important features of an assessment process?

In terms of process design the Review Group will wish to have regard to the harnessing of all possible technological capacity to aid both the assessed and the assessors. The RAE 2001 made good use of available technology. As the process moves forward, further thought needs to be given to the best means of collating, submitting and reviewing submissions prior to the conduct of a subsequent Exercise taking full advantage as technology itself advances, making greater use of 'online' references in the future, easing the load of the assessed and the assessors in accessing cited outputs.

In terms of the underlying principles of an assessment process we would continue to give priority to:

- peer review;
- transparent criteria;
- periodic (not rolling) review;
- rigorous and consistent working methods;
- emphasis on quality of outputs; and

- the minimum administrative burden consistent with the achievement of the five first principles.

If the Review Group seeks clarification on any issue raised in this document or wishes to pose any additional questions, please contact Professor Hadyn Ellis, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (and Pro Vice-Chancellor Research) at EllisH@cardiff.ac.uk.