

RESEARCH ASSESSMENT IN THE FUTURE

1. **THE RESPONSE:** This response is offered by a senior group of academics at Cranfield to the invitation to offer opening contributions to the joint funding bodies review of research assessment in higher education. The comments are offered primarily for consideration for application in those fields of study pursued at Cranfield, namely engineering, management and some aspects of the environmental and life sciences.
2. **RESEARCH ASSESSMENT TODAY:** It is considered most important that the dual support approach to funding of research should be continued. Equally, it is considered most important that the existing RAE mechanism should be abolished. A process by which a panel of finite size is expected to make a perfect judgment over an almost infinite, rapidly growing and multi disciplinary range of competences is asking too much (the word 'perfect' is used as there is effectively no process of appeal against the decision made). Additionally, the process by its very nature can offer only coarse gradings which, with ever increasing concentration of funding, must result for some in unmanageable discontinuities in funding levels at each exercise. Finally the process today is deeply flawed in that performance is claimed to be related to levels of 'international excellence' yet there is only a token international input into the process and there is widespread anecdotal evidence that insufficient weight is given to industrial research funding in accordance with government policy.
3. **RESEARCH ASSESSMENT IN THE FUTURE:** It is important to recognize the primary purpose of the assessment is that of distributing HEFCE funding in support of research; not that of producing 'quality gradings'. Some of the key requirements of an ideal process for such a purpose would include the following factors, it should:-

especially,

- recognize all aspects of excellence in all research
- offer differing processes for different subjects

and also,

- be a continuous process
- offer a grading on a continuous scale
- not develop a culture which discriminates against teaching
- be affordable
- be algorithmic based entirely upon quantitative processes

It is suggested that the best starting point for such a process would be to make direct use of the assessment processes and results produced by the Research Councils. Additional factors need to be introduced into the funding algorithm to reflect, say, research scale (PhD, RA), all other

research earnings and some of those factors presented for consideration in paper 1/02/126(a). Ideally all the data would be collected via the annual HESA return each institution makes to the HEFCE and the level of support funding then computed directly. Such a mechanism would avoid the need to define a research 'grade' and also simplify and reduce the annual data collection burden by removing the need for the 'Research Activity Survey' used presently to define research volume.

Such a process meets much more closely, than does the present method, the ideal properties identified above.

4. **THE POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF SUCH A PROCESS:** Clearly, over the present review cycle of five or six years the man-hours expended in the research assessment of each subject by the Research Councils must exceed that of an RAE panel by many orders of magnitude. Additionally, the level of expertise employed must be immeasurably higher. Results, in terms of research awards, are presented at regular intervals throughout the year thus would offer the opportunity to provide support funding based upon (say) a two year rolling average. The real challenge behind the proposed process is that of deciding what additional factors need to be considered, how best these could be quantified and their relative weightings in the process. Providing the sum of such factors exert a limited influence upon the result then it should be possible to move forward on this basis and also to bring about a transformation well before the year 2008 as is currently envisaged for the next assessment exercise.

RSF
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