

University of East London

Response to the Joint Funding Councils' Review of Research Assessment

Introduction

We are delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to the review of research assessment by the funding councils, and would like to acknowledge the wide-ranging and inclusive consultative approach that is being adopted.

We welcome this far reaching review, which will hopefully reconsider fundamental questions of what constitutes excellent research in order to identify and support it wherever it may be carried out in the UK Higher Education sector. It also provides a timely opportunity for making significant improvements to the way in which research in general is promoted and supported.

In our opinion all universities should engage in research, as all teaching in higher education should be informed and kept up to date by academic staff engaging in appropriate research and scholarly activity. Thus it is important that a "core- plus" model is implemented to fund research, and which enables investment to take place across the entire sector. Otherwise it is likely that the effect of more research being done in fewer institutions will impact adversely on the quality of teaching across the sector. In terms of equal opportunities this is unacceptable, and in our institution given our student profile this could have the effect of denying ethnic minority students access to teaching underpinned by an active research base.

We feel there would be value in researching what impact the Research Assessment Exercises have had since their inception, on subject areas, departments and institutions as a whole, particularly in relation to the ways in which assessment has influenced the range, type and quality of research that has been undertaken.

It is important to bear in mind in mind that while the RAE is firstly a mechanism to measure the quality of research it is also used to allocate research income directly by the Funding Councils and indirectly via policy decisions by Research Councils. Hence it is vital that there is both continuity in the process and absolute transparency.

Approaches to Assessment

Expert Review

The strength of a system of expert review lies in its basis on objective, measurable data, which of necessity looks retrospectively at peer-reviewed publications, products and other outputs, and analysis of research income and research degree completions. It must also look at projected research activity indicated by research strategy and vitality of a research culture.

This is a system, which has the confidence of the research community and is seen as fair, rigorous and robust as it has enabled many to become categorised as research active. However, it carries a risk of game playing, in which academics both produce and assess the quality of research. A wider pool of experts, drawn not only from academia but also from user groups and policy makers would be able to make assessments, which would be demonstratively seen to be more transparent.

Consideration needs to be given to how the increasing volume of inter-disciplinary research is assessed in future. Panels which cross current subject boundaries could be well placed to ensure that such research activity is valued and encouraged.

Algorithms

UEL researchers oppose widespread introduction of metric/algorithm models, which would disadvantage emerging interdisciplinary research. Objective measures of this sort would not take into account the fact that new areas of research take time to build up cohorts of research students and profiles of research grant income. Metric based systems would therefore discriminate against even high quality research in new universities which cannot compete where attracting research students is concerned with the established status of institutions such as Oxbridge, enjoying established status.

Self assessment

The current model incorporates an element of self assessment, which has the benefit of requiring a process of monitoring, review and strategy development at subject and departmental level. In RA 5 and 6

submissions can comment on their volume of international research matched against RAE criteria as well as the strengths and areas for improvement in their student numbers and research infrastructure.

It should not be used as the sole approach for a process of assessment, which determines funding. It may help by measuring their contribution to the international research agenda, and to encourage diversity within emerging research areas.

Historical ratings

If there is an advantage in using historical data, it is to lessen the burden on institutions of regular assessment. However, such a retrospective approach would have the effect of reinforcing existing research agendas in pre-1992 universities and would discourage "riskier" interdisciplinary research or collaboration with currently less highly rated institutions.

Concentration of support on what is currently considered to constitute excellence or has historically been considered excellent, can easily become irrelevant where certain activities fall out of favour as research areas not because of their diminished importance but due to the prevailing vogue. Thriving research activity is crucial to any educational system that is increasingly expected to underpin the well being and prosperity of the society which it serves; hence investment in innovative research which a historical approach to assessment may dismiss, should be supported.

Cross-cutting themes

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

Providing information necessary to calculate funding levels should remain a primary purpose of research assessment. It must however be a means of increasing the quality of research across the sector rather than within a restricted number of elite institutions.

b) How often should research be assessed?

Patterns of increasing student numbers and income generation may become clearer if the gap between RAEs were to be lengthened.

However on balance the current time between RAEs is probably appropriate in terms of adjusting funding to recognise changes in performance. We believe that all units of assessment should be reviewed within the same exercise.

c) What is excellence in research

The RAE measures research activity and benchmarks excellence within the range of research assessed. Key attributes in describing research excellence ought to be creativity, applicability and value to beneficiaries.

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

The current methodology using an arbitrary UoA cost base and submission volume could be improved by being less dependent on historical allocation and more responsive to beneficiary return and value for money. To work effectively such a system has to be transparent and detailed in advance, but doing so could lead to more gamesmanship.

e) Should each institution be assessed in the same way?

For purposes of comparability and transparency each institution should be assessed in the same way. However, a system which enabled institutions to demonstrate potential could lead to support for those with restricted resources.

f) Should each subject or cognate group be assessed in the same way

The present system should continue where each subject panel has the freedom to interpret the overarching RAE criteria in terms appropriate to the subject's priorities. Given anomalies in interpretation and output between UoAs it would be sensible for more proactive overarching quality assurance mechanisms to be introduced.

g) How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their submissions

Submissions should be generated by individual departments and moderated by institutions. Whilst the current approach of an arbitrary cut-off below which no funding is provided persists, institutions will make decisions with the consequences of the funding model in mind.

h) How can a research exercise be designed to support the equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education?

The RAE needs to address issues of equal opportunities at a more fundamental level. A forward looking approach to the design of future submissions would encourage the work of a wider range of researchers, who may be developing their research career, or who may have a broken pattern of employment and therefore fewer than the expected number of publications. It would require submissions to specify how their research and particularly their research infrastructure contribute to all aspects of equal opportunities issues.

As mentioned in the introduction it is likely that the effect of more research being done in fewer institutions would impact adversely on the quality of teaching across the remainder of the sector. In terms of equal opportunities this is unacceptable, and in our institution given our student profile this could have the effect of denying ethnic minority students access to teaching underpinned by an active research base. It would also discourage a new generation of research active ethnic minority academics.

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

It is vital that the process should be transparent, as simple as possible, and fair to individuals and institutions. It ought to be underpinning the continuing enhancement of the quality of research and scholarship across the sector.