

Response to Funding Councils' Review of Research Assessment Anglia Polytechnic University

Preamble

1. Anglia Polytechnic University welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review of Research Assessment and acknowledges the broader more open approach that is being adopted to the Review as compared with that prior to the 2001 RAE. However, the options which are indicated for consideration are very narrow unimaginative and are essentially derived from a status quo orientation, rather than a radical perspective. This is disappointing.

The purpose and accountability of the assessment of research lies at the heart of both process and approach. We would suggest that the purpose must be far more than the justification of funding, or the satisfaction of universities that they are performing at an adequate standard. The overriding purpose must be to ensure that the UK Government or taxpayer is supporting a research base which, in maintaining the UK's position in international research excellence however defined, also underpins through its quality and distribution, the many research needs of an advanced economy in the 21st century, which are satisfied in many domains by all universities, not just the élite group.

If we are to accept this then the process and approach needs a fundamental overhaul. The present system, in which academics undertake and quality assess their own work, is fundamentally flawed. **Citations are largely cited by academics, grant applications peer reviewed by academic peers, academic papers are largely refereed by academic referees. Not only is the current peer panel approach too narrow in terms of what is valued, but it is also fundamentally undermined by having potential beneficiaries of the system making decisions about the outcomes.**

2. We need to reflect on the notion of expert and move from a system when academics are assessing the academic worth of the work submitted to **one in which expert and user/lay involvement assesses the quality of work to the UK as a whole**, and where user related criteria are at the heart of assessment as well as academic criteria.

We would suggest that the current assessment systems are transparent, but possibly only to the university community, rather than to those who use its outcomes. The obligation on the Councils is not met by simply putting the outcomes on the web. It must go much further in an explanation of what can and more importantly what cannot be deduced from the outcomes.

Expert Review

3. We have already noted our concerns over the use of peers. We welcome the adoption of the terms expert review and support the view that such a panel, properly constituted could respond to the questions of excellence in terms of purpose and use, and consequently challenge research quality more fundamentally.
4. We would argue that the assessment should combine the past, based on evidence of output and achievement, with plans against which performance can in the future be evaluated. There is considerable merit in the Irish PRTL research allocation system which is predominantly future and project oriented.

The data used will reflect the purpose which we have discussed above. Criteria should be output rather than input based and hence concentrate on achievement, contracts delivered, knowledge transferred and publications written. The "value-added" dimension should figure much more strongly. It is arguable that the new universities secure very significant added value from relatively small amounts of income, and this supports the view that support should be much more generally provided rather than increasingly concentrated.

5. We acknowledge that the significance of the level of assessment might vary depending on the discipline, lone scholar to research team. We are however emphatically opposed to the assessment being at the

level of the Higher Education Institution. There may be merits in the assessment being at the level of the individual but before endorsing such an approach, the implications need further analysis.

6. It is perhaps inevitable that some grouping of subjects must form the basis of the assessment. Our earlier comments about the academic nature of the approach suggests that we should reduce significantly the number of groupings, acknowledge the significant commonalities of approach or methodology between subjects, rather than reinforce them through the adoption of the expert rather than peer assessment.
7. The expert approach is respected, familiar and if transparent, can be defended. It can however, lead to a self fulfilling and replicating system which may avoid the risk taking and the radical, all elements of an innovative research culture. A broader range of constituencies for panel representation is thus vital.

Algorithm

8. We would not support the sole use of algorithms in the assessment of research. It would encourage academics into a particular narrow approach, emphasise retrospection in the assessment and remove totally some of the key elements of the assessment including research culture, environment, vision and interdisciplinarity. Elements of an approach based on algorithms, such as the use of bibliometrics, are of very variable validity across the disciplines.

We would find the use of certain metrics acceptable, used in conjunction with other methods as long as they are stated well in advance and were used in a uniform way.

Self Assessment

9. This, of course, was employed by some panels as part of the RA5. Self assessment has positive attributes, as it would permit institutions to adopt their own approach and level. Its major strength lies in the value of the process itself which would include strategy development, monitoring and review. Many institutions currently undertake self assessment as part of their normal research monitoring activities. It would however be subject to several of the problems associated with criteria, validity and verification, and the overall validation process, with its associated difficulties of expert and peer review, alluded to above.
10. Associated with other approaches, self assessment may be worthy of further consideration. We could envisage self assessment to be used to support continuing scores where a different approach is adopted for those who want to demonstrate significant improvement. It may also help to encourage diversity rather than the status quo in the type and nature of research and research strategies in institutions.

Fundamentally however, we feel that it is, taken alone, an inappropriate approach in circumstances where it is the sole determinant of a system which allocates substantial funding.

Historical Ratings

11. We strongly oppose the adoption of an historical approach because it essentially freezes evaluations both on historical scores and more fundamentally on historical and, we would argue, inappropriate methodologies which seek to formalise sector discrimination between the traditional and modern universities.

Whilst the approach might provide us with a benchmarking methodology allowing the assessment of achievement against benchmark, and therefore possible value added to be assessed, we feel that there are more appropriate and valid approaches to value added which can be adopted.

12. We feel it is vital to develop a value for money indicator although we would suggest that this is best achieved independently of the assessment of quality. Value for money is best introduced in the allocation of research funding, not in the assessment of quality of research. Although crude, the existing HEFCE Research Performance Indicators are a useful first step.

Cross cutting

13. We have noted earlier the current narrowly defined process in which academics assess academics and their research. As constituted the exercise may be of some internal use, within disciplines and within institutions, but has little relevance to outside sponsors. A new approach could have significantly more benefit to both sponsors, institutions and the community at large. In all cases the funding councils must fully explain the meaning and implications of the assessment outcomes.
14. We prefer a five year period. We have given consideration to a longer period with the possibility for institutions or research groups to ask for intermediate assessment in order to demonstrate significant improvement. On balance, review every five years provides an appropriate periodicity which is administratively feasible.
15. Excellence must be seen as multi-dimensional and closely allied to fitness for purpose. It must recognise the importance of rigor and appropriateness of method to the problem posed no matter when and by whom this is posed. Attributes such as value to beneficiary, applicability and creativity are other dimensions which should be taken into account in the assessment.
16. It is vital that the relationship between assessment and funding is clearly articulated well in advance of any exercise. We would suggest that two should be independent of each other. Funding can then be made according to a separate set of criteria, of which historical distribution is the least important and beneficiary relevance and value for money are at the top of the list.
17. Disciplines and subjects have different traditions and approaches to quality. In this sense, we would want to encourage assessment appropriate to discipline rather than similar assessment approached being imposed. Hence we would resist further standardisation. Even with current apparently cognate UoAs such as Subjects Allied to Medicine, there are major differences of view on approach.
18. Institutions should have the maximum level of discretion, and certainly not less than at present. Institutions must have discretion over staff submitted. This allows them to reflect the quality of their own research and research environment and experts to judge that quality as presented.

Additional Points for Consideration

19. We feel it is vital that the RAE does not kill off research in the lower rated departments, in the interests of rewarding even more the higher rated departments. Continually elevating the funding threshold is clearly having savage effects throughout the system, especially if linked to the proposed HEFCE to fund only Ph.D.'s in 3a rated departments. Research income is not first about sustaining UK's international research excellence. It is also about sustaining regional economies, cultural and social development; innovation; and effective teaching, learning and consulting. The latter collection of items are clearly mainstream institutional objectives, so it follows that, if research funding is cut, there must be a knock on effect on these other elements. A base level funding for research in all HEI would therefore seem to be the logical conclusion.
20. Concern is expressed in the preface to the Consultative Document about the effect of the RAE on inter-institutional collaboration. It is clear from RAE 2001 that little genuine collaboration was evident in the way of joint submissions. In fact, when seeking advice from HEFCE, extremely negative responses were obtained on this point, both for weaker smaller departments legitimately seeking advancement and for larger departments seeking alliances in cognate fields. We would recommend a consideration of the Irish PRTL research allocation process which positively rewards joint submissions, with demonstrable consequences.

Conclusion

21. Regrettably, the consultation paper, having identified a range of legitimate concerns, has only offered optional solutions to some of these. Consequently, we are not confident that, since the questions have been narrowly drawn, the outcomes will be imaginative, and fair to the whole of the broad range of HEI which constitute the system. We would strongly urge consideration and adoption of the points mentioned above.