

## **Review of Research Assessment**

The following responses have been collated by Professor A H Cobb on behalf of Harper Adams University College. They are organised according to the six groups of issues, as documented in the invitation to contribute.

### **Group 1: Expert Review**

Research assessment should be a combination of prospective and retrospective considerations, taking a view of research themes defined by the institution. Assessment at the researcher level is advised, whilst not forgetting that the success of a research group may be greater than the sum of its parts. It is difficult to imagine assessment that is not organised around themes. Whilst there may be an administrative wish for fewer units of assessment, there is a danger of subsuming all topics into one homogeneous title e.g. biology. This would mean that the interests of specialist institutions and areas of research would be inadvisably reduced. However, greater effort must be made to ensure that panel membership is balanced and fair to all interests, and so more open for consultation.

### **Group 2: Algorithm**

Objective data should feed into the process, but to judge research solely on the basis of metrics is surely inappropriate. After all, journal impact factors are relative to the discipline, whilst journal rankings within the discipline are more acceptable. We accept however that individual paper citations will be more robust. To make more use of metrics would encourage more gamesmanship and an over-reliance on the safety of impact factors, rather than for example, the publication of innovative and influential monographs, reviews and reports. Equally, to rely on funding alone would be inappropriate. There may be more merit in recognising collaborations and value to professional practice which contribute to the national good rather than journal ratings!

### **Group 3: Self Assessment**

Whilst this approach could have merit, there would need to be great care in ensuring it did not become even more burdensome than the present system. Could it include a few but simple criteria, such as quantitative inputs and outputs, coupled to a self evaluation of perceived quality and an external evaluation of perceived worth?

### **Group 4: Historical Ratings**

It is not acceptable to assume that changes in research strengths are very slow. Research strengths may alter drastically, depending on the recruitment or loss of key researchers. Value for money should become a more important aspect of the process and not merely for the purpose of assessing change. It is arguably the case that small research groups and specialist institutions punch far above their weight in their cost effectiveness. Furthermore, an over-reliance on historical ratings would lead to complacency and a maintenance of the status quo that would be demoralising to all outside the few elite research centres. It would curtail researcher and institutional aspirations and national research diversity.

### **Group 5: Crosscutting Themes**

The existing 5 year review period is fine and largely accepted within institutions as a target to aim for. We would strongly encourage and support a system of discipline/subject reviews that include visits to institutions to assess real strengths against a self-evaluation. Assessors would have practising expertise in their fields and be able to recognise and record the specialist nature of the research in relation to regional, national and international criteria. Thus, on a parochial theme, Harper Adams is the sole UK provider for teaching and research in poultry and contains all the specialist arable and livestock enterprises for agricultural research. A visiting panel could assess the national value of these facilities and the research impact of staff activities. Areas of research such as rural economy and land management can equally be placed in a number of the current RAE subject groupings (Geography, Town and Country Planning, Economics, Agriculture), none of which are comprehensively inclusive of the diversity of research encompassed in this subject area. It will inevitably be marginalised relative to the core disciplines within the assessment process. Consequently, each institution should be assessed according to its specialist provision, rather than according to a single set of criteria, recognising diversity and promoting research excellence and value for money, as appropriate.

Equality of opportunity for researchers also needs to be addressed. An increased recognition of the contribution of postdoctoral and postgraduate researchers in particular in funding formulae is overdue.

As for priorities, there is a wish to move away from the gamesmanship of papers in journals to a system that recognises the contribution made to the success of the nation, including contributions to professional practice and impact to the community at large. Indeed we wish to stress the importance of evaluating research submissions in accordance to the value placed upon it by the practitioner.