

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

RESPONSE FROM KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

1. Background

The Joint Funding Bodies' consultation document has been considered by the university's Academic Directorate and by its Research Committee. The following response has widespread support from the university's academic community and research groups.

Kingston believes that research is at the core of the university's mission as an institution dedicated to the creation and transmission of knowledge. We take the view that research excellence (national and international) should be rewarded wherever it is found, and should be judged by output not by environment, culture or input. We see the national interest, as well as the interests of UK universities in general, as best served by a system that supports excellence in research through a system that is transparent, equitable, flexible and responsive. Detailed responses to the Joint Funding Bodies' questions should be read in this context.

2. Expert review

Kingston endorses the principle of expert review, though notes that the current peer review system makes potential beneficiaries the judges of their own outcomes. A combination of peer review with wider expert representation from user groups and the international research community could address this problem.

- Assessments should combine judgment of past achievements with some recognition of potential.
- Data should be based on output plus measures of income and research student activity. There should be a measure of impact for users and beneficiaries where appropriate. Value for money (productivity measured against historic funding) should also be considered.
- Assessment should be at the level of groups as defined by subject or cognate subject areas.
- There may be an argument for reducing the number of assessed areas, though detailed proposals would require close scrutiny.
- Strengths of expert review include the use of appropriate criteria for each area, with the proviso that transparency is an absolute requirement together with proper and fair treatment of innovative and interdisciplinary work. A potential weakness is the embodiment of self-interest in the assessment process.

3. Algorithm

We would not support algorithms as the sole means of assessment, though they may usefully inform the process in, particularly, Science or Technology based subjects.

- We would strongly resist metrics based on surveys of reputation; these are even more susceptible to self-interest groupings than peer review, and have an even higher level of subjectivity.
- External research income can be a useful measure of research excellence, though once again data on Research Council grant awards (compared, for example, with awards from charities) suggests that the peer review element discriminates against some institutions or types of research.
- Bibliometric measures are not appropriate to all subjects equally and may encourage a new form of game-playing.
- Research student numbers (and / or completions) are an acceptable measure.
- As suggested above, a useful financial measure would be value for money.

4. **Self-Assessment**

We see potential merit in a system that uses self-assessment, though doubt whether this can be the sole factor informing funding decisions. A system more economical than the present one could be built on the model of self-assessment in which validation was used for only a proportion of submissions. Such a system would, however, need to recognise deterioration as well as improvement in performance, and provision of output data and objective measures would be essential.

- Assessment should combine retrospective and prospective, with data provided on outputs, income, students, value for money etc.
- Criteria should be appropriate to subject areas, and should be common within subject areas across all institutions.
- Validation could be two-tier: light touch where a *prime facie* case for level ratings is convincingly claimed, more rigorous expert review where improvement is claimed or deterioration suspected.
- A potential advantage of such a system would be reduction in burden.

5. **Historical ratings**

We are strongly opposed to ratings by institution based on historical data, as this freezes distribution of research income (and calcifies reputations). It would act as a disincentive and financial impediment to the development of further research excellence, and would militate against the emergence of new research areas either nationally or within institutions.

It is not acceptable to employ a system that impedes change and development, and is in our view against the national interest and the interests of staff and students in universities.

6. **Cross-cutting themes**

- a) Assessment of research should be used to distinguish quality and to improve competitiveness of UK research. It should fund research excellence wherever it occurs, and should be sufficiently flexibly to enable emergence of new areas and recognise changes in research performance.
- b) On balance, we prefer a five-year review period, with all subjects assessed at the same time.
- c) The best research is distinguished by intellectual vitality, originality, and methodological rigour. Value to beneficiaries is an appropriate ingredient in many but not all subject areas (or at least is appropriate in different, and differently measurable, ways). Creativity and applicability both demand recognition, and were perhaps inadequately captured in RAE 2001.
- d) Assessment of research excellence should not be linked to funding through purely historical systems. We would support a combination of threshold achievement and international benchmarking in determining funding levels by subject. We are wary of making funding decisions on the basis of a perceived level of national importance by subject area.
- e) We are opposed to assessment by institution. Assuming research excellence can be satisfactorily defined for subject areas, it should then form the basis of assessment wherever located. There may be some room for flexibility, however, in the degree to which research groups position themselves in relation to, for example, beneficiaries and users. Provided criteria are transparent and equitable, such flexibility could be useful in promoting some forms of applied research.
- f) Assessment criteria should be appropriate to subject / discipline areas. Further standardisation would not be helpful. We would not in principle be against assessment by broad subject areas, but would wish to see more detailed proposals before making final comment.
- g) Institutions should have final discretion in putting together submissions.

h) Equality of treatment for staff is best protected by the use of a transparent assessment of research excellence. Any introduction of institutional assessment based on historical ratings or on reputational surveys risks locking some institutions and their staff into a vicious cycle of decline and disincentive.

i) We identify the three most important features of a future assessment exercise as:

Responsive / adaptive

Transparent

Fair to individuals / groups / institutions