

JOINT FUNDING BODIES' REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Response from the University of Bath

1: Expert review

The University of Bath believes that expert review is, and will continue to be, the most credible methodology to employ for research assessment.

- Retrospective assessment is generally regarded as the most objective and appropriate methodology.
- There does not seem to be a simple alternative to organising assessments around thematic areas.
- Assessments should take into account the achievements of the UoA throughout the period, not just those of the staff in post at the census date. [This might help to minimise the impact of the late 'transfer market'].
- It might be helpful if there was more benchmarking/discussion between the subject panels prior to the final decisions. Our academic community has noted differences in the proportion of departments awarded 5* in the different UoAs and there is a perception that it may be 'easier' to achieve a grading of international excellence in some fields of research than others.
- Patterns of submissions should be analysed to identify any underlying 'issues', for example, we observed that many Economics departments did not submit returns to the Economics UoA and the highest grade awarded by the Development Studies Sub-panel was 4, in field where the UK is supposed to be pre-eminent.

2: Algorithm

The University of Bath does not believe that it would be possible to construct an equitable algorithm-based model that also reflected the diversity of high quality research outputs across the sector.

- Metrics should clearly form a central part of the assessment process but our academic community believes that the moderating effects of panel discussion are necessary to complement them and complete the grading.

3: Self-assessment

The University of Bath considers that the RA5 and RA6 forms fulfil a useful self-assessment function but there is no strong support from within our academic community for a methodology based entirely on self-assessment.

4: Historical ratings

The University of Bath would not support a methodology based on historical ratings.

- Historical ratings would not reflect the changes in organisational structures and staffing levels that characterise the sector's response to declining funding levels.
- Historical ratings would always tend to under-value new departments and those with a young age profile.

5: Crosscutting themes

- a. What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?
 - Distributing limited research funding across subjects by a methodology that is understood and endorsed by the sector.
- b. How often should research be assessed? Should it be on a rolling basis?
 - An expert review methodology requiring the current level of preparation should not be undertaken at any greater frequency than the present system.
 - Some element of assessment that allowed for a more rapid and flexible response to changes in the performance of organisations, and their alignment with key research requirements, would be appreciated by some sections of our academic community but others would prioritise an enhancement that reduced the large periodic fluctuations in income associated with changing grades.
- c. What is excellence in research?
 - All of the RAE panels have painstakingly defined excellence in the context of their fields of expertise and we believe that it is probably appropriate to define excellence at a discipline level.
 - Research is most easily evaluated in an international context. It is relatively easy to agree what is 'International Excellence', but it can be difficult to decide on 'National Excellence'.
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- d. Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?
 - Research assessment should continue to determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject as long as there is a rigorous benchmarking system to avoid panels 'capturing' higher levels of income through grade inflation.
- e. Should each institution be assessed in the same way?
 - It is difficult to envisage an alternative methodology that would have any credibility.
- f. Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?
 - Given the financial implications of the research assessment, a free-to-choose assessment (for each subject) with no standardisation at all would appear very contentious.
 - Whilst uniform procedures for all subjects tend to force different activities into a straitjacket, it should be possible to continue to review the definitions of research outputs, for example, to recognise those of professional practitioners who do not publish peer reviewed papers.
- g. How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their submissions?
 - The pitfalls of greater flexibility (game playing etc) still seem preferable to the introduction of a more rigid system.

- In terms of 'game playing', a minimum number of research active could be agreed for any unit submitted in the RAE. This would deter departments submitting small numbers of staff to generate high grade outcomes for promotional purposes.

h. How can a research assessment process be designed to support equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education?

- There is a direct contradiction between 'equality of treatment for all groups of staff in HE' and a selective research exercise – higher levels of funding overall would be the only effective means of creating greater equality of treatment.
- There is a double 'penalty' for many humanities / social sciences departments as they are given the lowest fee banding (D) for teaching purposes, and then a low multiplier for their RAE gradings.

i. Priorities: what are the most important features of an assessment process?

- Important factors are fairness to individuals, transparency and rigour.

6: Have we missed anything?