

Vanessa Conte

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Dear Ms Conte

Further to your invitation to contribute to the Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment, please find the response of the 1994 Group of Universities attached.

Paul M. Marshall

1994 Administrator

1994 Group response to Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment

Group 1: Expert review

Our view is that expert review should continue to be the means by which Research Assessment is undertaken.

Combining assessment of research and teaching is appropriate when a single institution is undertaking a review of an area of its provision but would not be a feasible in a nationwide exercise whose object is to guide the distribution of large sums of public funding across HEIs.

Our response to the questions in paragraph 7 of Annex B are

- d. Assessments should be principally retrospective. In the current RAE, some weight is given to research plans, but that weight should not be increased. The greater the extent to which funding is allocated on the basis of the quality of research plans, the more expert will institutions become at writing research plans, which is not necessarily the same as being expert at doing research.
- e. The assessors should continue to use publications as the main source of information on the quality of research undertaken, supplemented by other indicators.
- f. Assessment at departmental level continues to be acceptable.
- g. We do not see any feasible alternative to organising the assessment around subjects. We note that the study commissioned by the funding bodies in 1997 of interdisciplinarity in the RAE found no evidence of bias against interdisciplinary research, though it found evidence of a widespread belief in such a bias.
- h. The major strengths of this approach are that it is essential to the underpinning of the dual-support system which we strongly support. Although there have been problems with translating RAE outcomes into funding, the RAE process itself continues to have high credibility within the higher education sector and we should not lightly abandon it. The main weakness of the expert review approach was seen in the RAE-2001 outcome: the failure of the expected link between RAE outcomes and funding. While we recognise that there will always be uncertainties about how assessment outcomes translate into funding, a greater degree of transparency on this would be most desirable.

Following up on paragraph e. above, our view is that the Review should give careful attention to whether the fundamentals of the RAE process could be retained, while changing the translation of judgements into grades and of grades into funding, in response to the difficulties which arose in 2001. We see the fundamental nature of the RAE being the periodic assessment of the quality of departmental research outputs against criteria of 'national' and 'international' excellence. That approach could be retained while changing radically the translation into grades and into funding.

For example, the published outcome of the assessment of each departmental submission could consist of a report of the proportions of the research which was found to be of 'international' quality, and of 'national' quality, and in calculating these proportions, the base should include non-submitted researchers, so cutting back the scope for game-playing with submission rates. A simple rule for weighting 'international' against 'national' research would then produce a ranking of departments in each unit of assessment, and the funding algorithm could be based on the ranking.

No doubt a number of variations on this general proposal could be generated, for example a less radical revision would involve the creation of a larger number of grades at the upper end of the distribution. The key message is that changes to the assessment system should tackle the weaknesses of the current system, the translation of raw assessments into grades, while retaining the fundamental strengths of the system.

Group 2: Algorithm

Our response to the questions on the algorithm are:

- d. It is not acceptable to assess research entirely on the basis of metrics. Some of the suggested metrics are wholly unreliable, and others are excessively manipulable.
- e. We do not see much that can be said in favour of the metrics suggested in the document. Measures of reputation are self-evidently an unacceptable way to allocate a large sum of public funding (how would this method have detected that the average quality of research in History was higher in Oxford Brookes University than in Oxford University?). The use of external research income would run counter to the philosophy of the dual-support system, would create difficulties for the humanities, and would create difficulties for the allocation of research funding within subjects such as Physics where some areas of the subject naturally attract much larger external research income than others; and is unacceptable. Research student numbers are excessively manipulable: institutions would have an incentive to recruit poor quality research students in order to improve their funding.
- f. We do not believe that a combination of metrics each of which is unsuitable will provide a suitable metric.
- g. HEIs would allocate internal resources towards activities which scored well on the metrics – subjects with high potential for external research income, research student number rather than quality. (Of course, the metric used in the existing RAE biases behaviour – by encouraging the production of 4 good publications in the census period – but the metric is closely aligned with the fundamental object of the exercise – the volume of high-quality research – so that the perverse incentives are small.)
- h. The only potential strength of this approach is that the use of bibliometric measures is worth further investigation. We are not convinced that bibliometric measures are sufficiently robust, across the full range of disciplines, to be at the centre of the process for the allocation of research funding, but we are open to persuasion that they might be given some *limited* role in the process. No doubt the review will seek expert advice on bibliometrics if it wishes to pursue this possibility. We believe that the other suggested metrics are deeply problematic.

Group 3: Self-assessment

We do not believe that self-assessment can provide the basis for a credible method of allocating a large volume of research funding. There is a fundamental difficulty in such a proposal. An obvious issue that needs to be addressed is that institutions might submit inflated self-assessments. Without comprehensive validation of the self-assessments (which takes us back to something like the existing RAE), the way to prevent the inflation of self-assessment with only limited sampling of self-assessments is to have high penalties. (Think of how the purchasing of tickets is enforced on many continental European public transport systems.) But in addition to deliberate inflation of self-assessment there might be a natural tendency for institutions or departments to over-estimate their research strengths and it would be unacceptable to have a funding mechanism that included heavy penalties for small but genuine errors of judgement.

Group 4: Historical ratings

We see little merit in the use of historical ratings. Even if the distribution of research strength between institutions changes relatively slowly, it does change and the change needs to be tracked. It would be exceptionally difficult to find a fair mechanism for allocating research funding between

institutions with a strong past record of high-quality research but no recent evidence and institutions which had provided fresh evidence of high research performance.

Group 5: Crosscutting themes

We wish to comment only on a subset of the questions raised here.

- d. The current frequency of assessment is about right. All subjects need to be assessed on the same frequency but it is not essential that they be assessed at the same time. However, any proposal to have a rolling assessment process would need careful consideration, because of the danger that a rolling process would give scope for new forms of tactical games-playing (moving academic resources around within the institution with the assessment cycle) and might also increase the incentive to HEIs to over-invest in the RAE process (keeping permanently in place the level of investment in administrative process that is currently brought into play one year in five).
- e. Research assessment should be used to inform the distribution of funds between subjects, but this should have a strong judgemental input by the funding bodies in order to minimise the temptation to assessment panels to advantage their subject by inflating grades. It is most desirable that the funding bodies give advance notice of planned changes in the distribution of funds between subjects.
- f. It is essential that institutions be assessed in the same way, though there is a case for separate funding of scholarship in institutions which opt out entirely from research assessment.
- g. We believe that uniformity of process across subjects is one of the features of the current research assessment method that gives it credibility.
- h. The problems arising from gamesmanship in respect of submission strategies would be largely resolved by a funding mechanism that made no distinction between non-submitted research and research that was assessed to be below 'national' excellence. (See our response to Group 1 above.)
- i. We strongly oppose any suggestion that the research assessment process should be designed to support equality of treatment. The process allocates research funding to institutions. It is for institutions to ensure that their policies promote equality.
- j. It is somewhat artificial to be asked to select three criteria from a list but, under protest, we would give highest priority to
 - Rigorous
 - Transparent
 - Resistant to games-playing

Appendix A

The 1994 Group, so called, because it was founded in 1994, consists of seventeen internationally recognised universities in Britain, who share common aims, standards, and values. The Group:

- share a commitment to research excellence, to personal teaching and to the particular needs of students from abroad;
- are research universities of international standing;
- offer substantial postgraduate programmes and most have separate Graduate Schools which cater for the particular needs and interests of postgraduate students; and
- integrate research and teaching with degree programmes at all levels designed and taught by first-class researchers.

The current member institutions of the 1994 Group are:

University of Bath;

Birkbeck College, University of London;

University of Durham;

University of East Anglia;

University of Essex;

University of Exeter;

Goldsmiths College, University of London;

Lancaster University;

London School Economics and Political Science;

University of Reading;

Royal Holloway College, University of London;

St Andrews University;

University of Surrey;

University of Sussex;

University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology;

University of Warwick; and

University of York.