

The Review of Research Assessment

Input from the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE)

Introduction

CIHE welcomes the review of the Research Assessment Exercise by one of our Council members, Sir Gareth Roberts FRS. The Council has always argued that the UK needs to foster and support internationally excellent research in higher education. Hence it has supported funding being focussed on those centres and teams where excellence resides. It has also supported the dual system of funding research in the UK, since it is important that higher education has the broad infrastructure and capability to undertake “blue-skies” research as well as research that is project related and funded through the various research councils.

The Council supports the increasing emphasis on knowledge transfer but agrees that this issue should be covered by separate funding streams to that for research.

The views that follow reflect the discussion held with Sir Gareth Roberts in November 2002. Those taking part in the discussion are listed in the Annex.

The Current RAE

The current arrangements for research assessment support excellence via a system of peer review that incorporates a business and international perspective. As such it is welcomed and should be changed only to reflect current weaknesses.

The current arrangements, however:

- fail to reflect adequately the joint research funding that is undertaken with the private sector;
- are inevitably retrospective and could fail to pick up emerging areas of research or the latest developments; hence there would be advantages in any future system having a more dynamic element;
- can be restricted by disciplines and both institutional and research council boundaries, whereas increasingly some of the most exciting research is interdisciplinary or involving cross-disciplinary teams;
- can tend to underrate the views of key customers;
- can ignore how far the process of research supports the development of researchers.

Our Views on the Issues Raised in the Review

Hence members consider:

- There should be fewer assessment units than in the current exercise; brigading would reduce the number of interfaces, support more interdisciplinary work and reduce the costs;
- The focus should continue to be on excellent teams rather than institutions, but there must be a mechanism by which teams can gain and lose places amongst the research elite;
- It is of the first importance that interdisciplinary research is encouraged by research assessment and that such interdisciplinary work is outward looking;
- The distribution of funding between subjects should incorporate a prospective element: anticipating research agendas which will become important in the future; while this was difficult to assess, HEFCE should work with industry and others to identify areas for capability building. There is no 'automatic' method of identifying fields which merit this kind of support;
- A case could be made for a process of annual rolling assessments - assessing the case for adjusting ratings in the light of developments over the previous 12 months; this process should be integrated with the Research Councils;
- The assessment of research quality should take into account whether the HEIs have sustainable research plans;
- Institutions should not have the right to determine who is submitted to the exercise; playing the funding game can distort allocations; similarly there should be mechanisms for ensuring that those researchers submitted actually do undertake significant research at the institution or are regularly involved in its activities;
- Selectivity must not undermine teaching/research links: scholarship must be encouraged and supported under the funding of teaching in all institutions;
- Creativity should be rewarded; so should other forms of *distinctiveness*; those making a contribution not replicated elsewhere should be recognised;
- Attempts to encourage leading research universities to engage more closely with the private sector may, paradoxically, work against the long-term interests of industry. There is a risk that such policies will distract the universities from basic research - and it is universities' ability to undertake basic research which is most important to business;

The function of the RAE is to

- provide incentives
- provide rewards;

any changes to current arrangements should be judged against how far they meet both criteria.

Of the two models set out by Sir Gareth Roberts:

- a) a reformed RAE
- b) a hybrid of funding driven by metrics and peer-reviewed plans to develop or maintain centres of excellence,

members considered that both would be acceptable to CIHE, with a preference for the latter and an even greater preference for a combination that included the suggestions set out above.