

## **Response to the Review of Research Assessment Invitation to Contribute The Educational Institute of Scotland University Lecturers' Association (EIS-ULA)**

The University Lecturers' Association of the Educational Institute of Scotland represents lecturing staff in all but one of the post 1992 higher education institutions in Scotland and a considerable number in pre 1992 higher education institutions since the merger of all of Scotland's independent Teacher Training Institutions with "old" universities.

The EIS-ULA has consistently voiced its concern at the lack of value afforded to teaching over research in the higher education sector across the UK and believes teaching academics, with a large amount of student contact time, are "looked down on" by their more research active colleagues. EIS-ULA believes if this is not corrected the UK is in danger of establishing a two tier higher education sector; one teaching focused and the other research focused. The EIS-ULA accepts it is foolhardy to expect every higher education institution across the UK to engage in research to the same level, and appreciates that centres of excellence which collaborate with sister institutions are a more productive and beneficial use of research funding, one likely to lead to greater economical benefits all round. However, the EIS-ULA also believes each constituent part of the UK should be encouraged to establish collaborative arrangements between institutions, both post 1992 and pre 1992, in order to ensure centres of excellence develop the economic and societal needs of the devolved administrations and not simply the research needs of English institutions.

Although the covering letter refers to "...a review of the mechanisms for assessing research quality", a wider remit implied under paragraph 6 of the invitation to respond: "...good reasons to re-examine the continued fitness for purpose of RAE" and in 26 to "... generate ideas and insights..." In this context the EIS-ULA believes the time has now come for a statistical analysis of the redistributive nature of the RAE, where a limited pot of money is redistributed to mostly the same institutions. The EIS-ULA would like to see data produced which identifies the levels of redistribution that has taken place over the past years; together with data on the benefits or negative implications for institutions and the sector at large from such redistribution. For example, indicators such as numbers of research-active staff could be misleading, more a marker for playing the system rather than one indicating the generation of real growth. Indeed, there are a series of questions that such an analysis could address:

- By how much has external research income increased?
- Has the cost to HEIs of making RAE submissions been properly evaluated?
- Has the number of postgraduate research students increased?
- Does an apparent increasing volume of research from 1991-2001 correlate to other economic indicators or policy making?
- Has there been a tangible career incentive for individuals involved in the RAE?
- Have the negative effects of a falling score, or fear of it, been evaluated?

Below is the EIS-ULA response to some of the specific areas of the consultation.

### **Approaches to assessment**

The only one of the four approaches mentioned here that EIS-ULA could not support is the algorithm approach. EIS-ULA believes this to be an extremely unreliable means of assessment and one that would require checking by expert reviewers. The EIS-ULA believes the suggestion of self-assessment which is the main tool for quality audits is worth exploring further. It is also felt that the suggestion for a historical ratings approach could easily sit alongside a self assessment approach, with limited expert peer review.

### **Cross-cutting themes**

- a) EIS-ULA accepts that there are fundamental issues which need to be addressed not least the fact that student recruitment is often influenced by the outcome of a research assessment exercise with the more successful "research active" institutions attracting a greater share of the student market. This perpetuates the two tier status as the strong grow stronger and the weak weaker.
- b) EIS-ULA believes a five year system of research assessment is probably about right and would not support a system that was shorter.

- c) In terms of excellence, despite a demanding review mechanism, there is a lack of confidence in terms of subjectivity being suffused with objectivity. Work published in international journals, subject to thorough peer scrutiny, may be objectively assessed, but then there is the aspect of political influence, even if subliminal (e.g. science & technology more favoured than the arts or history). This raises the issue brought up in d], fair distribution of funds between subjects, which EIS-ULA feels is even more difficult territory in terms of objectivity. Finally a question regarding the make up of the committee which EIS-ULA sees to be dominated by representatives from the pre 1992 “elite” sector of higher education which implies little appreciation and understanding of the research challenges faced by post 1992 institutions.
- d) EIS-ULA is concerned to ensure unfair advantage is not afforded those institutions from which panel members are drawn. EIS-ULA recommends the introduction of a training scheme for panel members which is accepted by the sector as transparent and ensures bias on behalf of a panel member is not possible.
- e) EIS-ULA also supports a broader rather than narrower view of assessing institutions, one which recognises that development has taken place, and suggests transparent criteria for assessment is developed which is understood and accepted by the sector. EIS-ULA supports the suggestion that a middle position be established which does not compare institutions that are very different and allows for potential to be demonstrated.
- f & g) Following on from c] and d] above. It is generally recognized that some units of assessment get softer treatment than others, and that the panels for some units of assessment do not possess all the knowledge encompassed by that unit. Although supporting the principle of a more streamlined and flexible approach, based partly on self-assessment, partly on historical ratings and partly on a lighter form of peer review, EIS-ULA believes that the last mechanism would have to effectively tackle the issue of parity of treatment across disciplines.
- h) On the matter of equality of treatment, EIS-ULA totally support the recent guidance issued to the sector by the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) which seeks to ensure that fixed-term and casual contract employment in the HE sector in the UK is dramatically reduced and hopefully eradicated. The Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulation 2002 was the spur for this guidance; EIS-ULA commends it to the review panel, particularly the section relating to contract research staff. EIS-ULA is also concerned that the vast majority of contract research staff are women and that the double injustice suffered by women contract research staff be immediately addressed.
- i) EIS-ULA agrees that a successor to the 2001 RAE ought to strive to include all of the priorities set out by the review panel, however, being invited to identify three most important characteristics of an assessment process, EIS-ULA suggests:
- not burdensome,
  - fair to individuals and institutions,
  - transparent.