

Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EQUALITY CHALLENGE UNIT

The respondent

The Higher Education Equality Challenge Unit [ECU] is funded by HEFCE, ELWa/HEFCW, SHEFC, and DELNI, together with Universities UK and the Standing Conference of Principals. The ECU is a UK-wide organisation, and works with HEIs, the Funding Councils, the sector agencies, the research councils and other funders, professional groups within the sector, voluntary and statutory bodies concerned with equality and diversity, and government, in order to carry forward its mission of improving equal opportunities for all who work or seek to work in the UK Higher Education sector.

The focus of the response

In the light of the ECU's remit, which focuses on equality and diversity within the employment function of HEIs, our response to the consultation is necessarily highly selective.

The Response

1. We recognise that some framework for selective research funding will continue to be required. However, it is imperative that any method employed should be:
 - transparent
 - consistent
 - accountable
 - equitable and inclusive
 - comparable across units of assessment (whilst of course recognising appropriate differences in research cultures)
2. We are not in favour of continuing the present scheme whereby HEIs can select who is entered in the RAE. In particular, we note that exclusion from the RAE can have a permanently damaging effect on someone's career, even though the cause of their exclusion varies greatly and may be misinterpreted. In some cases it is indeed because they are not active in research. By contrast, in others they may be excluded simply because they are not considered to be performing at the high international level that a UoA aspires to. Yet they may be highly research-active at a national level. Nonetheless, the impact on the individual's career can be profound in either case.
3. Another cause for exclusion to date has commonly been a career break in the assessment period or just before it, which may have a perceived or actual effect on research productivity. This tends to have greater impact on women than on men. It was theoretically addressed in the over-all regulations in the 2001 RAE, in that personal circumstances could be entered in a confidential section. But there was little confidence in the sector that consistent interpretations would be applied, and thus there were different behaviour patterns in different UoAs and between different HEIs. An inclusive submission, in which the UoA as a whole was assessed, would be fairer and would encourage panels to take account of all contributions actually made.
4. Similarly, there was uncertainty within the sector about how to treat those who were either actually young in years and thus beginning their careers within the conventional pattern, or 'academically young' in having just moved into academe from elsewhere, or having begun an academic career after being a mature student. There was a very high degree of variation between panels in what they said about this in their statement of criteria, and some anxiety subsequently that there had been further variation in

practice. With a strong sense of the uncertainties surrounding these issues, UoAs made highly variable decisions, with consequent differential effects on individuals which seemed arbitrary.

5. Any new framework should reconsider and redefine what outputs can be included in the assessment process, so that a broader range of work is admitted. Given cultural biases in the choice made of some fields and types of research, this could well have the effect of diminishing what can be perceived to be indirect discrimination, bearing more on some academic groups than others.
6. Underlying all of the points made is the need for every UoA to use the same criteria for dealing with personal circumstances, expressing these and applying them in precisely the same way.
7. Related to (6) is the need to ensure, in the future, that the process uses confidence-building measures (for example in training and auditing) so that everyone is fully aware of the assessment frameworks and is convinced that they will be equitably applied.