

JOINT FUNDING BODIES REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

INITIAL INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE VIEWS:

RESPONSE FROM HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR WALES (HEFCW)

November 2002

1 The invitation to contribute initial views to the Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment was discussed by a group of HEFCW staff with interests in this area. The main points which emerged from the meeting are summarised below.

MODELS OF ASSESSMENT Possible Model

2 The following two stage model of assessment was put forward in discussion. *Stage 1*

The first stage would be based entirely on metrics. Under this stage, institutions would submit quantitative data on research performance by UoA. Algorithms constructed from this data would be used to identify units whose performance appeared to have changed significantly since the previous assessment. Those institutions would then be invited to prepare full submissions for those units, for assessment under the second stage. Units whose performance appeared unchanged would retain their existing rating. In some circumstances, institutions might also be allowed to elect to make full submissions, irrespective of the outcomes of the quantitative assessment.

Stage 2

Under the second stage, the full submissions for the selected units would be subject to peer review by panels of experts. The peer review process would pay particular attention to assessment of the quality of research outputs and consideration of statements of units' achievements and plans. Additionally, in order to inform this stage of the assessment, all institutions might be asked to provide their own ratings for the units under consideration.

3 The group had some general concerns about the reliability of metrics-based assessment. In order to test the feasibility of the proposed model, it would be necessary, as a first step, to establish whether there had been a strong correlation in the 2001 RAE between the ratings awarded and the available metrics.

4 Irrespective of the assessment method adopted, it was recognised that a new rating scale would probably be required in order to allow for greater differentiation at the top end. It was thought that this could mean dispensing with some of the definitions of the lower ratings altogether. If it were not possible to map the outcomes of the 2001 RAE onto the new rating scale, it would be necessary to assess all units once by peer review using the new rating scale. This would establish the performance benchmarks required for metrics-based assessment in subsequent rounds.

5 leaving aside the issue of reliability of metrics, the advantages of the above model, once established, would be:

- reduction of the workload for Panels and institutions alike -the majority of assessments would be undertaken on the basis of metrics alone
- retention of an element of peer review, which the group considered to be more reliable than metrics alone.

Emerging Model

6 The group was aware of one of the models emerging from the review to date:

- all core funding for research would be allocated using research ratings based on metrics alone
- institutions with particular strengths would be able to submit bids for Centre of Excellence status, for assessment by peer review panels.

7 The HEFCW group expressed the following reservations about this model:

- there were considerable doubts about whether metrics alone would provide a sufficiently reliable and robust means of assessment. In particular, it was thought that there would be difficulties in establishing appropriate metrics for research outputs. Although some use might be made of citation indices, it would presumably also be necessary to establish formal hierarchies of esteem for various forms of publications output, including agreed rankings for journals. This would go against the spirit of the 2001 RAE, where it was emphasised that research outputs must be considered on their own merits, irrespective of where they were published.
- the number of Centres of Excellence would presumably be very limited. In consequence, it seems likely that they would be concentrated on an extremely small group of institutions. This could be very damaging for perceptions of the country's research standing.

COMMENTS ON CROSS CUTTING THEMES

What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for? What is excellence in research?

8 The group discussed whether research assessments to date had adequately taken account of applied research, or whether there was any case for modifying the definition of research or assessment mechanisms in order to place greater emphasis on such work.

9 The overall consensus was that applied work which is of good quality already scores well, and that, on balance, there is no need to make special provision for it by broadening the definition of research or modifying assessment processes.

Should each institution be assessed in the same way?

10 The general view was that all institutions should be subject to the same assessment arrangements. The focus of assessment is not on institutions as a whole, but on individual Units of Assessment.

Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?

11 The group supported the proposal that a small number of broad subject areas should be defined and assessment criteria within each area made as similar as possible. It would welcome a system under which there were fewer, broader Panels, supported by sub-Panels as necessary. Medical subjects were assessed in this way in the 2001 RAE, and the model seemed to have worked well.

How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their submissions?

12 *The group considered:*

- that, since institutions have to bear the financial and reputational consequences of research assessments, they should retain responsibility for preparing and controlling submissions. There was no support for the suggestion that these functions should be transferred to individuals, research groups or networks
- that institutions should continue to be allowed to select staff for assessment, rather than being required to submit them all. It is recognised that the present arrangement can lead to "games playing". However, the group's overriding concern was that any requirement for institutions to return all staff for assessment should not have perverse consequences for the development of associations between institutions -mergers at one extreme -that might otherwise have much to commend them.

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

13 The group considered the list of potential qualities for the research assessment process. It noted that some were inter-related, and could be grouped together -for example, "minimally expensive", "not burdensome" and "administratively efficient" comprise one set of inter-related qualities, whilst "rigour" and "transparency" form another. The group also identified a number of

additional desirable characteristics which were not included on the list. Overall, it concluded that it was particularly important that research assessment should:

- be rigorous
- have no perverse effects
- act as a driver to improve research quality, irrespective of financial rewards.