

Response to the invitation to contribute to the Joint Funding Bodies Review of Research Assessment

Submitted by the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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Introduction

1. The Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education as the professional body for all who teach and support learning in higher education in the UK welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of Research Assessment. The commentary that follows has been drawn from invited comments from ILTHE members and has been approved by the ILTHE's governing Council.

Commentary

2. This submission focuses primarily on those areas of the consultation that impact on the teaching and learning aspects of the work of HEIs. We argue particularly for a pragmatic model that facilitates diversity and contingency, recognizing that our 14,000 members are based in extremely diverse organisations of Higher Education, but are drawn together by a commitment to enhancing the status of teaching and improving the experience of learning.
3. Generally, consideration needs to be given to how to enhance the relationship between teaching and research and to ways in which this relationship can be valued through the research assessment exercise. Ways must be found to include and value research undertaken on teaching within particular subject disciplines. This will enable a strengthening of the research/teaching nexus and a mitigation of the negative impact of the current RAE on the valuing of teaching (Elton 1995).
4. There needs to be an awareness of the fact that a focus on the 'products' of research (i.e. publications and funding) can have a negative impact on the process of research itself, which can take time and may not always need to be tied to funding as a criterion for excellence.
5. The current focus of the research assessment process can also be detrimental to the teaching role of universities, creating for individuals conflicting demands on their time, which reduce the resources available for longer term development of research-informed approaches to supporting student learning. Members have indeed reported to the ILTHE significant pressure to put minimal effort into their teaching in order to concentrate on producing research outputs for submission to the RAE. We would argue for recognition for both the knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination of the work of HEIs, which inevitably includes dissemination via teaching. As argued by Jenkins et al in the response to this consultation by the LTSN Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (LTSN-GEES), there is now strong research evidence that the present system is leading both to a downgrading of the role of teaching and to an increased separation between teaching and research. (Drennan 2001, Jenkins, 1995 a and b, JM Consulting 2000, McNay 1997, McNay 1998, Newby 2001, Rogers 1999).

6. ILTHE is delighted that the review of Research Assessment will address *'the need to fully recognise all aspects of excellence in research (such as pure intellectual quality, value added to professional practice, applicability, and impact within and beyond the research community)'. (Section 6)*

Those committed to understanding and improving the professional practice of teaching in higher education, including ILTHE's members, report that they are discouraged from undertaking research to improve their teaching practice because of the perception, accurate or not, that such applicable research into academic practice is not valued alongside other forms of research.

7. It would aid the improvement of academic practice (and to do so is a proper concern of Government and the Funding Councils) - as well as increasing the quality, quantity, relevance and impact of research into academic practice - if this perception could, robustly and authoritatively, be laid to rest in future arrangements for the assessment of research. To achieve this would require close liaison between those sections of the Funding Councils concerned with research and with teaching. The 2000 review of research pointed to the importance of scholarship by stating, 'Teaching needs scholarship, and scholarship depends on, and is distinct from, research. What is required is for teaching to be animated by scholarship, and for scholarship in turn to be informed by research. We propose that HEFCE should make it clear that its funds for teaching include an element to support scholarship.' (HEFCE, 2000a, 4, para 23).
8. The willingness of those concerned with the review to consider the diversity of definitions of excellence is welcome. To do so allows claims that link research excellence to teaching, scholarship and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in professional areas. This relates to the issue of what is taken to be research. Any new system of recognising and rewarding research would need to be capable of acknowledging diverse outputs (beyond the traditional monographs and journal articles), has to encompass all forms of scholarship, not just empirical work, for example, evaluation reports, summaries of student feedback or statistics evidencing successful outcomes of pedagogic research.
9. One major purpose of pedagogic research is to inform and improve teaching, so the two need to be linked. Evidence of transfer to practice is accepted in other fields, for example, patents or new processes or project funding from industry. The research assessment process should therefore consider means by which the transfer of learning from research about teaching can be recognised as contributing to the scholarship of a submitting group.
10. A number of our members would argue that the current low status accorded to textbooks in the present research assessment processes is unhelpful, as this is a prime means by which outstanding academics can transfer the outcomes of their cutting edge research into classroom learning. The research assessment process has in the past neglected the importance of communicating the results of research to those who use it for educational and other purposes. Textbooks should not be regarded simply as a summation of accepted wisdom at a basic level on a topic, since many provide a distillation of many years of research into a format that is accessible to students. This, ILTHE members suggest, should be regarded as evidence of high-level scholarship.
11. It needs to be clear in the assessment process that the panels are open to a range of research paradigms and traditions and not limited to particular approaches. There needs to be a clear indication that forms such as action research, which is particularly common in research into effective learning and teaching, are as valued as other approaches.
12. Members would welcome a clearer recognition of the importance of an ethical dimension as a fundamental aspect of research evaluation and good practice.

13. ILTHE members would also argue that there should be greater clarity in the terms used to describe the assessment of research, in particular, differentiation between the evaluation of the reliability and validity of indicators of high research performance.
14. Attention needs to be given to how to support and value the contribution that novice researchers make. As things are currently, they are usually not included in departmental returns. This can for some have negative consequences. A better approach would be an assessment system that takes account of the different conditions and appropriate achievements for novice researchers and thus allows them to be included. This is not only beneficial to the individual but can also be an indicator of the existence of a strongly developmental research culture in different departments.
15. The way funding is distributed is flawed, as it simply rewards those who are already doing well. The system should take on board the notion of development and enhancement and find ways to identify departments/institutions who have the potential to do good work and for whom extra funding would be significantly helpful to support research development.
16. If the expert system of review were to continue, there should be greater transparency in how experts are selected and attention needs to be given to ensure a wide spread of expertise, approaches and types of institution. It is particularly important, if pedagogic research within the discipline is to be considered alongside subject research, that the panels include members with experience and expertise in understanding and using such research on learning and teaching in that subject. In the 2001 RAE, pedagogic research was stated to be 'a valid and valued form of research activity. It will be assessed by all subject panels on an equitable basis with other forms of research.' (RAE Report 5/99). However, outcomes from the review make it seem unlikely that this was the case in practice.
17. We would also argue for transparency in the means by which research assessment panels demonstrate their independence from external influences in their decision-making processes with regard to funding allocations.

Recommendations:

- 18.1 **We believe that the Funding Councils should amend the research assessment process to enable links between good research and good teaching to be strengthened rather than further weakened.** In particular, the disincentives that academics currently perceive to being committed and effective teachers need to be dismantled. The ways in which research assessment currently operates values research at the expense of teaching.
- 18.2 **We argue that textbooks produced for use with students should be considered among other outputs as evidence of high quality scholarship and research.** This is the case in other systems of reviewing research (French et al, 1999) and would go some way towards rebalancing the current inappropriate under-emphasis of the role of teaching in the work of academics and other staff who support student learning.
- 18.3 **Future funding arrangements need to ensure that all staff are enabled to be scholars in their discipline and in the teaching of their discipline.** The 2000 review of research pointed to the importance of scholarship by stating 'Teaching needs scholarship, and scholarship depends on, and is distinct from research. What is required is for teaching to be animated by scholarship, and for scholarship in turn to be informed by research. We propose that HEFCE should make it clear that its funds for teaching include an element to support scholarship.' (HEFCE, 2000a, 4, para 23).

- 18.4 **The work that academics undertake in supporting the learning of both postgraduates and undergraduates who undertake research projects should be recognised as contributing to the research profile of a department.** Any new funding model for research would need to recognise the value of this activity as being the means by which the researchers of the future are 'grown on'. Recognition needs to be made both of the inputs by the supervisors of such activity and of the contributions that are made by the junior researchers themselves.
- 18.5 **Funding arrangements for research need to be transparent and genuinely to recognise the value of research into the teaching of the discipline as well as subject-specific research.** The ILTHE is committed to supporting and disseminating such research as part of our mission to improve the experience of learning and support innovation, through activities like our journal, our series of books on *Effective Learning and Teaching* and our members' only resource area on our website.
- 18.6 **Similarly we argue that funds for teaching should genuinely include an element to support scholarship.** Institutions will have a role to play in ensuring that such funding is used appropriately within the diverse contexts that HEIs represent to facilitate the development and sharing of good learning and teaching practice. The ILTHE and our partner agencies, including the Subject Centres of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), the Generic Centre, the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) and others also have a role to play in promoting and disseminating outcomes of these activities.
- 18.7 **We argue that there should be explicit recognition of the importance of an ethical dimension to research.** This should follow best practice as demonstrated within the academic community.

Conclusions

19. The review of the current research assessment exercise process provides an opportunity for the Funding Councils to rethink the ways in which the diverse activities of the Higher Education sector can be re-engineered better to achieve the Funding Councils' objectives. There is no question that the ways in which research has been evaluated and funded in the past has impacted significantly on the activities of those who work in HEIs, in some cases, we would argue, negatively. We would hope that this opportunity is taken to reconsider how the emphasis placed on teaching and learning activities by higher education staff can be rebalanced in order to ensure not only that universities can continue to contribute positively to the knowledge economy but also that the community of teachers and learners can be reassured that their interests are central to the missions of universities and colleges.

20. References

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