

Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment

Response from Association of Tourism in Higher Education (ATHE)

The ATHE welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review and wishes to be actively involved in future stages of the consultation process.

The constitution of the association states its objectives to be as follows:

- to act as the Subject Association for tourism in higher education in the UK;
- to promote the development and recognition of tourism as a subject for study in the UK and liaise as appropriate with other European Union countries and internationally;
- to encourage high standards in learning, teaching and research;
- to identify and communicate "good practice", statistics and other information about first degrees and postgraduate qualifications in tourism;
- to support, undertake and disseminate research to further these objectives;
- to maintain links between education on the one hand and employers and other interested parties on the other.

At this stage of the process the Association wishes to respond to points raised in Annex B, Groups One and Five.

Group One – Expert Review

Q7. e. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

While generally supporting the approach of expert or peer review over the other methods available, ATHE would wish to seek clarification on the process by which expert or peer reviewers would be selected. In addition, ATHE would welcome greater transparency concerning the selection of expert advice from beyond normal panel membership.

In the absence of a discrete and separate Unit of Assessment for tourism and related subjects, the tourism research community has to submit its research across several other Units. Given the breadth of subject coverage in these Units, the selection of appropriate expert or peer reviewers able to make judgements on the quality of the tourism research submitted is a matter of concern. This is an issue which affects all interdisciplinary subjects submitting across multiple Units of Assessment (or any future equivalent to the UoA). Similar issues arise in terms of the relationships between leisure and sports science research in Unit of Assessment 69.

Group Five – Crosscutting themes

Q17. f. Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?

The key concerns here relate to ensuring the equitable treatment of both interdisciplinary and single discipline subjects.

It is felt that interdisciplinary subjects such as tourism are not best served by a discipline-based system. Such a system results in the splitting of tourism submissions across several Units, and thus the relative 'invisibility' of the strength of the total submission in the subject area.

The issue of making qualitative judgements based on submission to journals also arises here, as it has been suggested that interdisciplinary subject journals are not viewed in the same way as single discipline journals for the purposes of the RAE. This may disadvantage interdisciplinary researchers who have to make strategic decisions on whether to submit their work to tourism subject journals or to journals from other more well-established and recognised academic disciplines such as geography or management. This issue will need to be considered when designing any future review system.

Q 17. h. How can a research assessment process be designed to support equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education?

It is of fundamental importance that any research assessment process seeks not only to reward and recognise the quality of existing research, but also to create an environment in which new research and new researchers may be developed. Within the current system newly emerging or 'young' academic subjects, which by their nature will have larger population of researchers at this developmental stage in their careers, may be disadvantaged or insufficiently recognised and rewarded.

It is apparent that a 'catch 22' situation has emerged for the existing process of research assessment. Funding in some developing subject areas is not awarded because the existing research base is not yet strong enough, and the institutions concerned then find it difficult to support new and developing research areas due to lack of funding. From the institutions' point of view, such new and developing areas represent a higher risk than mature and well-established fields, which attract external funding more easily.

Mechanisms for encouraging new and developmental research areas and researchers must therefore be designed in to any future research assessment process.

Q17. i. Priorities: what are the most important features of an assessment process?

It is considered that the most important element of any assessment process is clarity and transparency. While institutional 'game playing' (Section 5 of the 'Invitation to Contribute') will always be evident to some extent in any funding allocation system, much of this can be avoided by being absolutely clear and explicit about the process and about how decisions and judgements will be made.

It is also vital that the application of the criteria by which such judgements are made is consistent across all units (or their equivalents). The aim should be for *equitable*, if not *identical*, treatment of all subject areas (with reference to the response concerning new and developing subject areas in Q17h above).