

## Submission to review of research assessment

### *Introduction*

The Association of University Teachers (Scotland), AUT(S), has over 6,000 academic and academic-related members in Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs). We welcome the opportunity to comment on the joint funding bodies' review of research assessment.



1. The RAE has been a UK wide exercise and AUT(S) therefore associate ourselves with the UK response submitted by AUT. In this supplementary submission we consider exclusively the specific implications of any future research assessment exercise for Scotland.
2. The devolution of higher education to the Scottish Parliament has created a distinctive system of funding and political accountability for the Scottish Universities. The key elements may be summarised as follows. Autonomous higher education institutions with a responsibility to consult internal and external stakeholders and maintain legal and financial compliance, are responsible in the first instance to their own Court. These universities must report in respect of public funds to the SHEFC and must now comply with the new condition of grant which relates to the use made of these funds in accordance with public policy. The SHEFC allocates funds but is itself subject to broad Ministerial guidance. All these parties- the HEIs, SHEFC and the Minister- are subject to scrutiny by the responsible committee of the Parliament, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. The system does not deprive universities of their autonomy but it does establish checks and balances, with public accountability in the broadest sense for the use of public funds, which has to meet the overall policies and aspirations of Scottish society, as reflected politically through the new Parliament. This broad accountability is acceptable and, so long as in practice it is not exercised in a heavy handed way, neither the autonomy of universities nor the academic freedom of our members need be compromised. On the other hand the Scottish people, through the Parliament, have a new democratic mechanism whereby there is the potential to harness the strengths of Scottish higher education and research, to meet widely shared aspirations for economic and social progress.
3. Scottish Universities are part of an international higher education community, as reflected by their participation in previous RAE's in which the top target was international excellence and in which Scottish higher education was particularly successful. Whilst we share the many criticisms of previous RAEs which have been made by AUT and others, we do not advocate that Scottish Universities set up any system of research measurement exclusive to Scotland. It is right that SHEFC is undertaking the current review in association with the other funding councils.
4. However, it must be remembered that any measurement of research success can only provide information or numbers which may be relevant background information to funding decisions. The key factor in these funding decisions, as regards SHEFC research funding, must be the background Ministerial guidance, which itself is informed by the wider vision of the role of Scotland's Universities in Scotland's social and economic development. That vision is of course likely to have elements of continuity as well as change and to come into greater clarity at times of election- every four years, with the next Scottish Parliamentary election in May 2003. One of the historical aspects of that vision, which we are confident will not change, is the view, which we share, that Scottish Universities should maintain their research excellence and be adequately funded to be able to compete with the best in the

world. In this respect, numbers and rankings generated by an RAE type exercise, may of course be of some assistance to SHEFC as the funding body. But judgments, judgments which should only be reached after the widest possible consultation, will remain necessary about the extent to which and manner in which any direct connection should be established between the numbers/rankings and the funding allocations. Another important aspect of the vision of the role of higher education- and one which we believe will grow in significance- relates to the need to encourage research and harness research by way of knowledge transfer, to support the growth of a knowledge economy, to inform public policy and to provide the evidence base for the improvement of public services. So far as we can see, any numbers and research rankings produced by any conceivable future UK wide RAE, will be of very limited assistance to SHEFC in funding decisions for this purpose. That is why AUT(S) has argued for a third stream of funding- knowledge transfer funding- for this specific purpose. It is also why we have argued that this needs to be new money, not raided from the funds required to support research excellence.

5. We have stated the argument above in a very general way. One specific example of the difficulty experienced under the previous RAE relates to the funding of research in Nursing and Midwifery. Here, a subject which only recently transferred to the University sector, has been building up research capacity. The RAE scores were low and the implication of a SHEFC research funding methodology tied to RAE scores was that a whole subject area would be severely underfunded for research. What is worse, this was a key area for research related to the necessary evidence based improvement of the NHS in Scotland. For these reasons, we believed that the need for adequate research funding in nursing was a matter for the Scottish Health Minister as well as the Minister responsible for higher education. It is important that SHEFC learns lessons from this sort of experience and considers very carefully whether and how to relate funding to any new research assessment exercise and how to ensure that universities are adequately funded for all the purposes implied by the Parliament's vision of the role of higher education.
6. In Scotland formulaic research funding only accounts for 18 per cent of the SHEFC budget, yet it impacts inordinately on staff and management practise. It is therefore welcome that this review will address the costs of the RAE and we would urge that the full costs of staff time and stress are also considered. Another impact of the RAE has resulted in virtually all the pre-1992 universities in Scotland announcing restructuring and staff losses after the results and funding outcomes were known. If, as claimed, this is a result of a lack of funding for the 2001 RAE, despite the extra funding in Scotland, then the evidence does not support the view that RAE encourages better institutional management but rather boom and bust financial management.
7. It is for all these reasons that this review of research assessment should not go beyond its remit and review the process of research funding. The present paper and consultation meetings have talked of developing funding methods based on new systems of research assessment. This review should not determine or develop an assessment that is dependent on a funding method as this is for the funding councils to decide. SHEFC has always used results from the RAE in a different and we would say more enlightened manner, so we would object most strongly to a new system that will not allow for this divergence in funding methods.
8. Once the funding councils have collectively concluded the review of the RAE, we look forward to a further consultation in Scotland on how SHEFC should fund and support research in the Scottish Universities.