

Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment

Response from the Association of University Teachers

Introduction

The Association of University Teachers (AUT) is the largest academic union in higher education and represents more than 45,000 staff working in academia, research, teaching, libraries, IT and administration. AUT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the joint funding bodies' review of research assessment.

The very short timescale for responses to the initial review has made it difficult for us to give the complex issues raised by the review the detailed attention that they deserve or to provide an "evidence-based" submission. However, we note that this is the first stage of a major consultation exercise, and that there are plans to consult stakeholders via "meetings, focus groups and a dedicated web-site." These meetings need to be widely advertised and representative of the whole profession. It is vital that the HEFCE steering group gets out and speaks to ordinary researchers and not simply university managers. Any replacement for the RAE must enjoy the consent of the thousands of academics who do the actual research. This must include the army of 40,000 contract researchers.

Earlier this year we submitted detailed evidence on the problems of the 2001 RAE to the Science and Technology select committee. We do not intend to revisit these criticisms in the following pages. The purpose of this submission is to frame our comments around the discussion topics in Annex B.

Section 1: Methods of assessment

Expert review

The AUT believes that peer review must remain central to any performance-based approach to research funding. Peer review is far from perfect, but is widely understood and respected within the academic world. It is also a cost effective way of making use of existing expertise and of spreading knowledge of research activity among academic colleagues.

We would welcome the casting of a wider net for assessment panel members. It is always difficult to balance the need for continuity and change, but we have received convincing evidence that, at least in some disciplines, the composition of panels is perpetuating a rather narrow view of what constitutes admissible research and an unhealthy orthodoxy in relation to prevailing theoretical paradigms and research methods.

5. A number of commentators and organisations have come out in favour of a combined assessment of teaching and research. On the surface, there is considerable merit in this proposal. A combined assessment would help to augment the relationships between teaching, scholarship and research and also has the potential to reduce universities' central administrative burden. However, given the different assessment criteria applied to teaching and research, it is difficult to see how this proposal could be put into practice.¹

7. (a) The current RAE is a wholly retrospective system of assessment, particularly in terms of funding. The disadvantages of this have been well-rehearsed, particularly the fact that in research past performance is not always a good predictor of future success, and that a bias against the promising young researcher who has not yet had the opportunity to build up a track record is built into the system.

In a recent article Sir Gareth Roberts floated the idea of a new "core-plus" model of assessment which would combine retrospective and prospective elements. There is already a small prospective element in the current RAE (i.e. in the form of RA5). In the future this could become a more central part of the funding regime. It should also be modified to incorporate a more inclusive assessment process. For example, the prospective element could include staff, who for a variety of "strategic" reasons, were excluded from the normal RAE submission.

A prospective assessment system should be aimed at counterbalancing to some extent the concentration effect of the current RAE. We recommend that a new prospective system be linked to some form of 'seedcorn'

¹Policy Research in Engineering, Science and Technology (2000), *Impact of the Research Assessment Exercise and the Future of Quality Assurance in the Light of Changes in the Research Landscape*, Final report prepared for HEFCE.

fund. This fund should be available to university researchers for starting up new programmes and enabling new subjects and fields to develop. Currently, a low departmental RAE rating can stifle research opportunities for all its members, even though some of them have great potential and exciting ideas. We need to be able to throw a lifeline to these researchers before they are demotivated or leave the system in frustration. In the 1994-95 funding allocation, as an interim measure, HEFCE earmarked £16 million for supporting start-up research in the former polytechnics. This idea should be built upon by establishing a new element of funding for Research Development, but through the provision of additional funding by the government, rather than by reallocating existing funds. It should be available on application to any researchers in departments with low RAE ratings, or in departments which did not enter into the RAE. It should be available for all areas of research, across all disciplines, and applications should be assessed by established peer review procedures. In order to have a real impact on the quality of research and teaching in our universities, the size of the fund would need to be at least 10 per cent of the total amount currently provided by the three funding councils for research.

7. (d) We cannot envisage any alternative to organising the assessment around subjects or thematic areas. Single-discipline units of assessment should continue to be used in any future assessment process. However, we support the call for the creation of further sub-divisions within disciplines. The extension of the number of single-discipline units has been helpful, but some researchers still feel excluded or disadvantaged by the breadth of the subject divisions. The principle should be that all researchers should have equal access to the RAE and that they should be confident that peers will assess their work with acknowledged expertise in the relevant field.

Algorithm

Performance indicators such as the volume of external research funding can provide useful background data in assessing research quality. It is already used as part of the RAE formula and in a more comprehensive way in Australia. Probably one of the main advantages is that much of the data required is easy to collect and already gathered. However, the negatives tend to outweigh the positives. For example, there is heavy emphasis on the volume rather than the quality of research outputs. Funding indicators also favour the biological and medical sciences at the expense of the humanities and social sciences. Finally, the Australian model has been bedevilled by technical problems. An audit report on publications data submitted by the universities to the Government in 1996 uncovered an error rate of 59%.²

We remain sceptical about using quantitative metrics as the main method of assessing research quality. Bibliometric analysis, for example, is no real substitute to peer review. Citations cannot always be used as a proxy for quality because authors can be cited for negative reasons. Other problems include a time lag between publication and citation and a bias in favour of US journals. Finally, citations tend to work best in science, rather than in the arts and humanities.³ As a result, we do not believe that citation data is reliable enough for it to become an important element in determining national funding policy.

Self-assessment

Incorporating a prospective element will obviously require a greater degree of self-assessment than is currently the case with the RAE. We would welcome this development, although one needs to guard against additional institutional games playing.

Historical ratings

There is some logic in allowing those departments who already demonstrate "international excellence" to be subjected to less frequent research assessments than other departments. To some extent, this chimes with the new QAA approach to teaching assessment. However, if we exempt 5 & 5* departments, the majority of UK researchers would not be included in a future research assessment exercise. Moreover, without opportunities for lower ranking departments to be able to bid for extra resources, this proposal risks ossifying the UK research culture.

Section 2: Cross-cutting questions

²Harman, G. (1998) Audit Doubts Over Academic Publishing, *Campus Review*, March 13-24, p.12.

³PREST (2000).

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

The primary function of the RAE is to provide the information necessary to calculate funding levels. In the aftermath of the 2001 exercise many departments suffered a huge cut in research grant despite an improvement in grade. Before embarking on future exercises, there is a need to clarify the relationship between RAE grades and funding levels.

How often should research be assessed?

Post-RAE redundancies are a major problem in UK higher education. More than 2,000 academic jobs have been cut or threatened in the past year and a key reason has been the government's failure to fully fund the outcome of the RAE 2001. Rolling assessments may help to smooth funding changes and are therefore worthy of further examination.

c. What is excellence in research?

AUT strongly favours the adoption of a broad and inclusive definition of research. We would make a special plea for a more inclusive attitude to research into learning and teaching carried out by academic staff regardless of their specialist subject. Pedagogical research that advances knowledge of student learning or introduces new teaching methods should be positively encouraged.

d. Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?

AUT have some concerns about the "subject pots" described in the document. We are worried that using indicators such as "strategic judgement on the importance to the UK" would accentuate the funding gap between the sciences and the arts and humanities.

e. Should each institution be assessed in the same way?

We support the middle position suggested by HEFCE. It is important that any variation in assessment does not imply reflect and reinforce existing institutional hierarchies (for example, by choking off research opportunities for the post-1992 universities). There are very persuasive arguments to be made about the importance of maintaining a broad institutional research base within UK higher education, both to ensure that the variety and volume of research activity required to meet the nation's needs is undertaken, and to ensure the ability of our institutions (rather than just a small group of them) to attract and retain high quality, motivated staff.

We therefore agree that the "*the system should provide a ladder of improvement so that all researchers and institutions have the opportunity to demonstrate potential*". Investment in future and potential success is just as important a part of the process of funding research as is investment in existing excellence (see our proposals for "seedcorn" funding).

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

One of the ways to reduce the bureaucratic burden on staff and institutions is to examine whether the assessment process is equally relevant to all areas of research. It may be that, at least for as long as under-funding persists, some measure of selectivity is inevitable in certain areas of experimental science in which very expensive instrumentation and installations are required. It is not clear that the same arguments apply across all other areas of research, including, for example, theoretical science or philosophy or literary studies. A closer examination of these questions might suggest a much more limited exercise in future, rather than a repeat of the comprehensive assessments that have characterised previous RAEs.

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

At the moment, there is considerable variation in the way departments and institutions handle the submission process. For example, some departments go to considerable effort to consult with academic staff before, during and after the submission process. At other places, the process is top down and dominated by a small number of senior institutional managers. Similarly, some departments are particularly prone to "games playing", such as transferring staff onto "Other-related" contracts. We believe that there should be greater monitoring of these practices and that HEFCE and Universities UK should agree to some form of national code of practice on

research assessment. A code of practice should help to bolster the “people dimension” of UK research policy (see below).

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

We welcome the emphasis in the consultation on the importance of the “people dimension.”

Any research assessment and funding methodology must, in future, recognise that universities are now under a new legal obligation. They must not treat fixed term staff any less favourably than permanent comparators- under the Fixed Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002. The requirement for no less favourable treatment is already in force but, after July 2006, a further provision will come into force, as all fixed term contracts will be deemed permanent, except where there has been objective justification for renewal on a fixed term basis.

The intention of supporting equality of treatment and non-discrimination in any new approach to research assessment is welcome. But it must be understood that it is now necessary to consider how to avoid discrimination against employees on fixed term contracts, alongside other characteristics noted in the consultation such as gender, sexuality, race and disability. Because so much research in universities is conducted by research staff currently employed on fixed term contracts, this is a major issue for any new research assessment exercise.

For these reasons we welcome the recommendations of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee relating to the RAE, in particular that *the current review of higher education research assessment must ensure that whatever follows the RAE does not disadvantage contract researchers*. We note that several expert witnesses gave evidence that the previous RAE operated in a way which was disadvantageous to contract researchers.

Currently, the system of dual funding is based on some explicit or implicit cultural assumptions. In a nutshell, it is assumed that a caste of funding council funded permanent academics will apply for project funds from the Research Councils and apply these funds to employ a caste of researchers on fixed term contracts. That is clearly a situation now in a state of change. So in future both the funding councils and the Research Councils will need to work together to refresh both the mission and the methodology of dual funding so that the funding climate supports the behaviour of those universities (such as Robert Gordon) which are grasping the nettle and progressively moving towards job security for their research staff.

HEFCE's fundamental review of research in 2000 led to the creation of a working group on equality issues and research policy. So far, we have yet to see any significant recommendations from this working group. Despite changes to the RAE, the snapshot approach retains the potential to discriminate against women on maternity leave. The 2001 RAE panel criteria and procedures placed the onus on units of assessment to ensure that individual staff circumstances, including maternity leave, were notified to the panels. In the run up the last exercise AUT received anecdotal evidence that heads of department were reluctant to implement these guidelines (on the grounds that panels were unlikely to adhere to them). As a result, there remained a tendency to exclude maternity leavers from the exercise if they had not returned four items of research. The AUT believes that the funding councils should issue stronger guidelines to protect the position of women who take maternity leave. This could form part of a national code of practice on “people issues” and research.

Finally, the current RAE promotes an invidious distinction between those whose work is submitted for assessment and those whose work is not. We agree with the recommendations of the Science and Technology select committee that:

“Any future research assessment mechanism must be able to give a fair appraisal of the research without tempting universities to continue the divisive and demoralising practice of excluding some academics from the process (paragraph 41). “