

ACADEMY OF LEARNED SOCIETIES FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
RESPONSE TO THE JOINT FUNDING BODIES REVIEW OF RESEARCH
ASSESSMENT

The Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences (hereafter The Academy) succeeded ALSISS in 2000, building on the latter's 20 year history of campaigning for the social sciences. The Academy represents 44 learned societies (and thus 50,000 social scientists) and 359 individual Academicians. The Academy welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review. The Council will collect the responses of its 44 member societies after November 29th and produce a social science synopsis, which will inform its response at the consultation stage. This response from the Council of the Academy is structured to address the issues raised in Annex B, with additional points made towards the end, as requested.

Group 1: Expert Review

5. Combining assessment of teaching and research, while reinforcing the essential ties between them inside HEIs and in the public mind, would be problematic for at least three reasons.

(a) The different nations within the UK have had different systems of assessing teaching, and Scotland, particularly, would be unwilling to abandon its 'own' procedures. That could threaten the essential UK-wide nature of research assessment.

(b) Different HEIs have such different missions that devising one system to cover a 'teaching only' HEI and a 'research only' organisation would be a Herculean task.

(c) The criteria for satisfaction or excellence in teaching and in research are so different that one system seems unworkable.

6. The Academy is acutely conscious of the problems that can arise with expert or peer review, but are absolutely convinced that other systems would be worse. Expert review should be retained: but the burden on the chosen 'experts' needs to be reduced, and the use of international experts needs further discussion.

7. (a) A combination of prospective and retrospective assessment is desirable.

(b) Panels should be able to ask for objective data relevant to the discipline they are considering, as long as HEIs have reasonable notice of the request.

(c) If interdisciplinarity is to be encouraged, the submission of units wider than departments has to be possible; if regional or other collaborations are to be encouraged, then cross-institutional submissions have to be possible. The individual or the research group is not appropriate if the funding stream is to the institution. For social sciences, the assessment at current UOA level is about right.

(d) The Academy, and before that ALSISS, has always argued for a larger number of social science UOAs, so that there is a clearly defined discipline in each UOA. This allows consensus about who is, and is not, an expert in that discipline. For example, putting media studies with library science was a mistake, and we welcomed the establishment of a separate media studies panel in 1996.

(e) The major strength is transparency: it is easy to recognise what UOA rating relates to which department, and to determine who is, and is not an appropriate 'expert' in that discipline. There are problems in some disciplines with the concept of

‘international’ research: this is easier to define in, for example, physical chemistry than it is in the sociology of Scotland or the economics of Northern Ireland.

Group 2 Algorithm

8. It is entirely mistaken to believe that any algorithm is objective. The work of the sociologists of science since the 1960s has repeatedly demonstrated the underlying subjectivity behind such measures. The Academy can, if necessary, provide expert advice for the committee to show that none of the five suggested ‘objective’ measures is actually any such thing.

(a) Reputational surveys are the most unreliable and invalid metric of the five suggested. The Academy totally rejects their use.

(b) Research Income is an input measure, and research assessment should be a judgement of output and performance.

(c) Bibliometrics are unreliable in all disciplines where new work is disseminated by book publication rather than journal publication. In most social sciences bibliometrics are distrusted, because monographs and edited collections contain much of the best research. Citations are particularly unreliable in disciplines that move forward in books. If bibliometric judgements are to be made about books, a further difficulty arises. Currently panels in social science look for monographs produced by high status publishers. The commercial decisions of a diminishing number of multinational publishers determine what monographs are published. Books issued by smaller houses are less likely to be known, and therefore cited, so a bibliometric, citation based system would doubly disadvantage those who publish with smaller houses because their work is judged by the leading houses to be too specialised or not commercial. Already judged negatively because the book is issued by a less

prestigious house, its chances of citation are reduced by the smaller promotional budget of that house.

(d) Research student numbers, and completions, should be one metric, but need to be interpreted. Expert panels in the specific disciplines need to interpret the statistics on research students and on completions.

(e) We are unsure what is meant by measure of financial sustainability. If it is proposed that HEIs are required to demonstrate that the QR monies earned in previous RAEs have gone into the UOAs that earned them, this would be welcomed by many social science departments.

9. We would advise the councils to examine the social science evidence on the lack of objectivity in all metrics.

10. In summary, therefore, we are opposed to algorithms.

(a) Metrics alone should not be used.

(b) There are no objective metrics.

(c) The metrics cannot be combined to give an accurate picture.

(d) The metrics would immediately be distorted by the ingenious strategies devised by academics to subvert them.

(e) There are no strengths. The weakness is the mistaken idea that metrics are objective when they are not.

Group 3: Self Assessment

12 and 13

(a) In a genuine self assessment, HEIs would have to have freedom to include any data they chose. However such a self-assessment would have to include lists of

publications, grants, and strategies for sustaining research cultures. If the system were changed to one in which the 2001 and any subsequent gradings held for longer periods (e.g. 10 years or 15 years) an intermediate self assessment would be sensible.

However, HEIs would have to have the right to request a full assessment after 5 years if they felt they had improved substantially.

(b) A combination of retrospective and prospective assessment.

(c) If self assessment were to be used, expert panels in each discipline would have to produce a list of minimum criteria to be included in self assessments in that discipline.

(d) There would have to be random audit of the probity of the factual material. An expert panel would have to be available to evaluate the self assessments. If the system were based on a random probity audit, and a detailed scrutiny of self assessments that claimed to describe an improvement, the whole exercise would be much less expensive and onerous.

(e) Self assessment of a routine kind to maintain an existing rating would be less burdensome. Claims for a regrading would be burdensome, but that would be a reasonable burden because voluntary.

(f) Self assessment could not be the basis for substantial redistribution of QR monies: for maintenance of an expert-panel grade, they would be acceptable if audited.

Group 4. Historical Ratings

16 (a) We are unconvinced that the distribution of research strength in most social sciences changes slowly. In science and engineering where patterns of grant income, equipment, and large research groups, do indeed change slowly, if at all, the distribution of research strength is seen by experts as relatively stable. In most social

science, research strength can change quite rapidly. Sociology at Cardiff, for example got a 2 in 1989, a 3 in 1992 a 4 in 1996 and a 5 in 2001 and this is not an isolated example.

(b) The 2001 gradings are a reasonable baseline.

(c) Only regular review by expert panels can reliably identify rising and falling UOAs.

A value for money element would need to include data on the internal distribution of QR monies inside HEIs, to show how the QR has been spent.

(d) Longer intervals might encourage more fundamental, basic research.

(e) The work done by UOAs to build up the careers of young staff would be more apparent if a more historical approach were adopted. However such an approach would discourage innovation, and the Academy wishes to encourage innovative social science wherever it is developing. New ideas can develop in new places, and any RAE must allow for that.

Group 5: Cross Cutting Themes

18 (a) Greater collaboration between the funding councils and the research councils to minimise the burden would be welcome. In the social sciences, the data provided every 5 years to the ESRC in order to apply for postgraduate recognition is burdensome to collect and submit and the data duplicate several aspects of the RAE. However the severe understaffing of the research councils would need to be remedied so adequate databases can be maintained.

(b) A rolling research assessment lacks clarity and transparency: the current system is clear and transparent. A ten year interval between full assessments would be better, as long as improving UOAs could apply for re-assessment after five years.

(c) Excellence in research is best recognised by experts in each discipline. Excellent research is innovatory in theory, in methods, in methodology and in terms of its findings.

(d) Providing QR monies to a subject on the basis of its ratings is problematic, especially because a rational panel would inflate its ratings to increase the 'subject pot'. On the other hand, the historical balance reflects costs not merit. A strategic judgement on the importance of the subject to the UK is too open to political pressures and biases.

Criteria such as external funding and international competition can be problematic (as we have suggested above) in some areas of the social sciences. For example, research on Scottish politics or Welsh social history does not attract large funds, and its international status could be hard to assess, but its quality can be outstanding.

Historical allocations are unfair to new and rapidly expanding subjects, or those where innovations demand new levels of funding: the use of CIT outwith the sciences is an example of new techniques needing new money.

(e) If it were possible to devise a ladder of opportunity it would probably be welcomed in the social sciences community.

(f) We welcome discussion of the possibilities of grouping subjects - perhaps into cognate areas corresponding to research councils - and developing assessment in different ways for each area. However, this would reduce the transparency of the process and the results for users outwith the academic community.

(g) If the QR monies are given to HEIs, then, realistically, they have to be ultimately responsible for their submissions.

(h) We are not convinced that sufficient research has been done to substantiate the accusations of discrimination by HEIs against some categories of staff. However, the rumours and accusations are themselves damaging to the aims of the funding councils. We see a place for explicit statements from the funding councils that expert panels in the social sciences will not downgrade UOAs who include staff whose research is on controversial and challenging topics such as Queer Theory. Clearer guidance from panels that UOAs which include staff from all races, both sexes, and all ages will not be penalised would be a measure to counter discrimination.

(i) We regard the three most important features as:

rigour

transparency

resistance to political interference.

Group 6: Omissions

19. The Academy Council would welcome a much wider and more open-ended review of research assessment: the questions posed here are narrowly constrained by the current conventions. This set of questions does not encourage a radical review of the RAE system.

In particular we would like to see a much clearer emphasis on rewarding UOAs that are nurturing younger scholars, and innovative work, wherever they are in the HE

system. Explicit reward for helping young scholars develop, especially those beginning to publish, will ensure a future for research in the UK.