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Response to the Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment on behalf of the British Accounting Association.

The British Accounting Association is a membership organisation that represents the views of UK accounting academics from across the whole range of HEIs. The current membership is a little under 800 and the BAA promotes research and teaching excellence and fosters links with the UK professional accountancy bodies as well as other academic networks internationally.

The following notes the issues that the BAA would wish to be recognised in the context of the above review. The main points that we would wish to highlight are:

- That we believe that peer review is necessary and we would wish it to continue.
- We believe that the Accounting and Finance panel has worked well and has benefited creativity and allowed a broad range of approaches to accounting research to be recognised and rewarded. BAA would wish to see the benefits of such an approach available across the various sub-disciplines of business and management. This could be arranged through the use of an over-arching Business and Management panel co-ordinating the work of a series of sub panels.
- We believe that there is benefit in recognising engagement with practice in areas such as our own. Thus, we would see it as important to extend the remit of what is considered in any assessment, to include work that is professionally relevant. In this context we would see it important to recognise that work that contributes to policy rather than pure consultancy output.

The following provides more detailed commentary following the structure of the documentation provided.

Context

We should note our support for the two assumptions in paras 9, (a) and (b).
The accounting professional bodies provide support for research in accounting that links particularly into the transfer of knowledge to accountants in practice and the BAA would welcome recognition of this type of activity.

In relation to paragraph 10 we would like to highlight that the contribution institutions can make to the supply and development of researchers will be particularly constrained in an area such as accounting. In our area there is a need for some researchers to be developed from the pool of qualified accountants who have first trained in practice and have then decided to return to the academic profession. This is a small pool as there are difficulties in attracting interest from those who are

used to higher salary packages and hence there is a tendency to lower recruitment numbers for postgraduate study than in some other academic areas. It is particularly important therefore that if the contribution of institutions to the supply of researchers is to be measured, it is done in the context of the discipline itself. The fear is that if the quantity measurement is absolute rather than relative to context, accounting departments might be seen to be performing poorly, when they are instead working well.

Clearly there may be an argument for suggesting that targeted help be available for the accountancy discipline to ensure that the supply of researchers is increased (re 10.c). In this respect and given the competition from salaries outside the academic field increases in scholarship funding might be useful. The problem is that this is not a new and underdeveloped area of study, but instead a mature discipline where nevertheless recruitment remains a problem.

Approaches to Assessment

The BAA is supportive of the continuation of expert review, seeing peer review as an essential and important part of assessment.
(It is unclear why, in general terms, financial experts are seen as relevant lay representatives.)

Algorithm based assessment may have some minor role in providing basic descriptive data, but is unlikely to provide rich judgements of activity. It is likely to lead to more 'gamesmanship' and is likely to restrict creativity as particular targets are seen as the only ones that can be valid. Accounting research has much to say about performance measurement and the problems of dysfunctional outcomes in relation to achieving targets is well documented. This research warns of the difficulties encountered in ensuring that performance measurement systems achieve the requisite behaviour without undermining other elements of organisational activity.

Self-assessment is perhaps an integral part of research management within an organisation, but is perhaps the area where significant effort is expended at institutional level in relation to the RAE. It is the area where extensive effort is used in seeking to portray the activity of the department in a good light and where authorial judgement may have the opportunity to outrun actuality. Whilst some qualitative description must be necessary to help review it would be most helpful if this were descriptive rather than self-evaluatory. There are considerable savings throughout the system that could be made in simplifying the data provided in RA5/6 to discourage the extensive drafting and re-drafting of these documents that took up considerable effort in previous exercises. More extensive self-evaluation is likely to increase the efforts expended here to little benefit in terms of external assessment. The activity of self-assessment should be left to the institutional management processes.

Historical ratings are unhelpful as a stand-alone item, but are clearly part of the context. They provide an indicator that may be helpful in the assessment of the risk that any investment in an institution is a good investment. It must be possible for new entrants to have recognition.

In summary **we favour an amalgamation of the above approaches that relate to research evaluation, with the emphasis on the provision of factual and descriptive information providing a basis for expert/peer evaluation.** The descriptive data should include retrospective publication/outcome data as before, and it should be recognised that there is a wide range of potential outputs.

Whatever the approach, the assessments should be based on Departmental units. This however raises some particular issues for the overall discipline of Accounting, which can be assessed separately or returned under Business and Management (B&M). Those staff returned as accountants under the B&M panel were nevertheless, in 2001, cross-referred to the accounting panel. Hence there was a sound and consistent scrutiny of all the accounting entries, allowing expert opinion in all approaches to accounting research. The BAA would commend this approach as good practice. The BAA would therefore support the formation of panels in all sub-disciplines of management. These panels could then report to an umbrella panel whose members would aggregate the information to provide an overall assessment, dealing with any minor elements that are not covered by the subject panels.

It is not seen as practicable to amalgamate a review of teaching and research unless there is a clear aim that all institutions would wish to amalgamate those two themes as key elements of their mission. Whereas there is a strong claim for research led-teaching in some institutions this would not be the universal claim and thus it would be difficult to develop a universal method of approach. It is recognised in making this statement that we note HEFCE seems to be recognising the need for differentiation of mission at institutional level.

If interdisciplinarity is seen as important it is perhaps also useful to assess all subject areas at the same time. This would be difficult logistically if teaching and research evaluation were to be amalgamated. It is difficult to see how the Quality regimes emerging from QAA would usefully encapsulate a deep evaluation of research achievement.

Cross-cutting issues.

(a) Assessment of the research base provides a basis for allocation of research funding and it provides a 'kitemarking' of the perceived quality of departments that is useful to stakeholders, including students. The data-base provided could be made use of by research councils with some co-operation between the bodies. For example, research training recognition could be provided to those departments achieving a certain research grading if that grading were based in part upon PhD completions.

(b) Interdisciplinarity and the need for institutions to have known planning horizons suggests that assessment would be all done at the same time. It would be regrettable, for example, if different settlements for subject areas resulted from their assessment at different times in an economic cycle or because of government change.

(c) Research excellence is difficult to define, but is easier to recognise and that is why a peer evaluation is an essential part of the process. However, it should be recognised that dissemination of policy related research is an important element of the work of areas such as accounting that are closely related to professional and commercial activity. Panels might usefully be guided to consider how that should be recognised.

In this context it should be emphasised that the aim should not be to recognise the output from consultancy activity that has no contribution to the genuine acquisition of new knowledge.

(d) Funding should be known in advance and not related to the out-turn of the decision making process in such an arbitrary way as experienced in 2001.

(h) It is difficult to design a process to be non-discriminatory, but the implementation of the process can address such issues directly. The training and the composition of panels will be the most important element to address this matter.

The three most important features of the RAE must be that the system is

- Rigorous
- Fair to individuals and institutions (this means it should not be open to manipulation or games-playing)
- Contextually sensitive so that it can recognise the particularities of the different discipline areas or the diverse career trajectories of individuals.