

**Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment  
HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW and DEL NI (October 2002)**

**College of Occupational Therapists response to the  
Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment.**

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2. **Context: professional body perspective**
- 1.1 The College of Occupational Therapists is pleased to contribute to the joint funding bodies' review of research assessment. The College is the professional body representing 24,000 occupational therapy personnel in the United Kingdom. There are 44 pre registration education programmes with circa 5,300 students in 28 Higher Education Institutions. Most offer post registration courses and there are some rising research centres.
- 1.2 We are responding from the perspective of a research emergent discipline. As a professional body, our principal concern is the interdependence of research, scholarship, education and practice to support clinically and cost effective interventions and services (Ilott & White 2001). The education standards for the validation and review of programmes conferring eligibility for state registration with the Health Professions Council contain new requirements for research and scholarship (JVC 2002). This is to support the development of occupational therapy and occupational science as academic subjects. It is also to counter institutional tactics. An internal scoping study indicated the extent of strategic exclusions in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise. Less than 10% of staff (n=30) were submitted and a significant number of these were included under Nursing or Education.
- 1.3 This response reflects the views of members of the Research and Development Board. The Board comprises researchers, educators, a post graduate student and practitioners working in health and social care. Their role is to provide a strategic steer to the College and ensure the views of the diverse constituencies are reflected in responses to national policy documents.
2. **Recognising and rewarding research emergent subjects that contribute to the health of the nation.**
- 2.1 We acknowledge the complex, contentious task of advising about the future of research quality evaluation. The new model will need to achieve a balance between accountability to the taxpayer and securing the trust of key stakeholders, particularly after the disappointing funding for the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise.
- 2.2 Our priority is that the model contains mechanisms for recognising and rewarding research emerging subjects, centres and staff. The Task Group 3 Report about research in the nursing and allied health professions (HEFCE 2001) contains a compelling business case for developing capacity in subjects which contribute to the health and well being of the nation. We look forward to the Higher Education Funding Councils providing match funding and working strategically with the Department of Health to build the research capacity of these professions.
3. **Approaches to the assessment of research quality**
- 3.1 The College welcomes the three contextual factors stated in paragraph 10. Developing and sustaining a community of researchers is a primary objective of the Research Forum for Allied Health Professions. We assume that knowledge transfer encompasses applicability, relevance and the impact of research upon improving health and social care. Targeted help is essential to nurture subjects on an upward research trajectory, especially those with historic underfunding in relation to the size of the profession and with comparable subjects such as Education (HEFCE 2001).
- 3.2 A logical starting point for selecting the approach is fitness for purpose taking into account the philosophical and practical aspects of assessing research quality. All four approaches given in the paper contain barriers as well as benefits. For example:
  - 3.2.1 Expert review: it will be difficult to agree comparable standards across diverse subjects that provide a consistent, equitable and easily understandable outcome.
  - 3.2.2 Algorithm: bibliometrics is challenging for those professions/subjects whose journals are not in the Social Science Citation Index or Science Citation Index (CPNR/CHEMS 2001). This method also devalues communicating with those able to implement research findings such as policy makers, managers, practitioners and consumers.
  - 3.2.3 Self assessment: is not an open, independent or properly accountable process.
  - 3.2.4 Historical ratings: reflects the status quo and thus disadvantages research emergent subjects and institutions on the 'ladder of improvement'.
- 3.3 In relation to the questions about the cross cutting themes, the College has consistently expressed concern about the title and heterogeneity of Unit of Assessment 11 'Other Studies and Professions

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Allied to Medicine'. We would argue that the allied health professions are gaining sufficient maturity to deserve a sub panel or separate unit of assessment as other vocational subjects such as Nursing or Education.

- 3.4 We support the Select Committee on Science and Technology recommendation that "HEFCE should be encouraging high quality research wherever there is teaching" (House of Commons 2002, paragraph 23). One way of ensuring this, and also to reduce game playing, would be if institutions were obliged to submit information about all departments and staff.
- 3.5 The Research and Development Board considered that the most important features of the assessment process were that it be informative, fair to individuals and institutions, and resistant to games playing. Other priorities included supporting capacity building, encouraging co-ordinated, interdisciplinary research programmes, involving consumers/users of research at strategic and operational levels of the assessment process; valuing the applicability and impact of research; and rewarding improvement.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The College of Occupational Therapists welcomes the opportunities provided by the review and will be pleased to contribute to the next stages of the consultation process.

#### **References**

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