

From: Dr Tom Graham, Chair, CURL Board

To: Vanessa Conte, HEFCE

Re. Review of Research Assessment in Higher Education

1. CURL, the Consortium of University Research Libraries, is pleased to make a response to the Joint Funding Bodies' Review of the Research Assessment Exercise. CURL has consulted widely amongst its twenty-six members, which include the largest research-led universities in the United Kingdom.
2. The primary area on which we can comment is the significance of publication in journals as a measure of research quality and the implications of this. We are aware that, notwithstanding the growing range of different means of research dissemination, there was actually a growth in the percentage of total outputs represented by articles from 62% in 1996 to almost 70% in 2001. There appears to be a growing emphasis, at least perceptually, on journal impact factors as a measure of quality. However, studies have shown that the citation levels of papers within the same journal can vary by two orders of magnitude: it is therefore a very imprecise instrument when it is applied to individual papers and can be misleading. I have had sight of a submission from Edinburgh University Library which looks at how the significance of individual publications can be assessed, and would commend examination of this approach.

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) itself is a driver for publication in these high impact journals, and this – along with several other factors - has strengthened the trends towards monopoly control in the journals market. This in turn has helped to maintain the high annual increases in journal prices (c. 10% per annum). The impact on library purchasing power of a continuation of this trend is highly significant. In turn, this will increasingly lead to declining access to research information within UK HEIs. A move away from control solely by periodical publishers towards increasing control by HEIs would help to make this less likely.

3. CURL believes that it would be helpful if Funding Councils state positively and prominently that they will guide RAE panels to give due weight and consideration to articles published outside the monopoly journals market. We believe that this would be a very significant step. There are two strands of developments of this kind

(a) . There are new publishing ventures which are developing new business models. Examples of these are: - .

- SPARC (<http://www.arl.org/sparc/>) and SPARC Europe (<http://www.sparceurope.org/>)
SPARC is a world-wide alliance of organisations and libraries which encourages competition in the scholarly publishing market and publishes journals at a lower unit cost than their commercial equivalents.

- ELSSS (<http://www.elsss.org>)
ELSSS is a new publishing venture in the field of social science, led by the academic economics community in the UK, which aims to offer high quality, peer-reviewed, journals in the social sciences to the academic and learning communities world-wide at a fraction of the cost of commercial equivalents.

(b) A number of institutions are beginning to offer the facility to self-archive material, both pre- and post-publication in institutional repositories.. In this country, such a movement is being developed in the SHERPA project (<http://www.SHERPA.AC.UK/>). This project, funded by the JISC and CURL, aims to use open archiving software to create a series of interlinked open archives in the UK where academic research papers and articles can be archived and made freely available to the world of scholarship and learning over the Internet. It is also an example of universities themselves re-asserting their place in the publishing chain and claiming an enhanced role in the whole publication process. Such repositories could – once validated by peer review - develop into a University-managed system for research publication

It should also be noted that if individual academics were encouraged to self-archive their work in institutional repositories, the management of RAE from an institutional point of view would be much easier. CURL believes that it would be helpful if the Funding Bodies actively encouraged such developments.

4. This response has focused on the issue of the significance of journal material as an indicator of quality and the effects of this in economic and access terms. A shift in the balance of control could improve both the economics and the accessibility of research output with consequent benefits to research quality. By the time of a future RAE, the developments outlined in 3 above will have developed enough for the funding councils to recognise the diversity and validity of such research dissemination methods explicitly in their guidance for assessment. CURL will be happy to make further comments on any of these points, if required.

29 November 2002

curl

Registered Charity No. 1026543

Incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee Reg. No. 2733294

Executive Secretary: Dr Marie-Pierre Détraz

Registered Office, Secretariat and address for correspondence:

12th Floor, Muirhead Tower, The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT

Tel: +44 (0)121 415 8106 Email: m.detrax@bham.ac.uk URL: <http://www.curl.ac.uk>