

Joint funding bodies review of research assessment

Response of the School of Arts and Humanities (SAH), University of Wales, Bangor

The School of Humanities

The School of Arts and Humanities at Bangor incorporates the departments of Communications; Cyraeg / Welsh; English; History and Welsh History; Linguistics; Modern Languages; and Theology and Religious Studies. It employs over fifty full time lecturing staff, and several part time staff. As well as the disciplines named in department titles, it includes staff active in archaeology, heritage, film studies, creative writing, and journalism.

Discussion Groups 1-4: Broad models of assessment.

The SAH is broadly satisfied with the 'expert review / group 1' model employed in RAEs. It believes it produced broadly **fair results** and that it is the only one **appropriate to humanities disciplines** – where quality of research is often not closely reflected in the mechanical quantity of research outputs. Of course, the SAH does not object if other groups of subjects are assessed in different ways which they feel meet their needs. However, within the humanities, it would argue for a process even more firmly based on 'expert review' than the RAEs. Especially it questions the value of some of the 'objective' information demanded in the RAEs as a basis for judgments of research standards. For example, post-graduate numbers tend to provide a better indication of a department's geographical location, or its ability to fund its own students, than its inherent research quality; whilst external grant capture can measure pure inputs, rather than what was done with them.

Algorithmic / group 2 models are **subject to obvious distortions** not related to research quality. For instance: unanalysed bias in surveys; accidentally rich sources of external funding for particular areas (eg. The Wellcome Trust providing rich grants for medical history); the possibility of citation cartels, where scholars cite the works of colleagues merely to boost numbers of citations; the fact that the most frequently cited works in the humanities tend to be those the author is attacking (often for poor scholarship); accidental preferences among research students to work in particular geographic locations; the financial competence of institutional managers etc, etc, etc, etc.

Self assessment / group 3 models would be **burdensome** because scholars would have to learn and implement an entirely new system, and would be **potentially inequitable** unless there were resources to validate all claims (in which case this would collapse back into 'expert review').

Historic ratings / group 4 models seem to **defeat the point of a research assessment exercise at all** (they would go on rewarding places which had always been rewarded): the admission in the annex that the system would have to be combined with another one appears to concede this. The substantial changes in ratings of some departments from one RAE to the next (departments falling as well as rising) illustrate the essential injustice of this model.

Other issues

Notwithstanding this broad support for expert review, the SAH has suggestions which it would make to improve the operation of an RAE style exercise, particularly to remove potential injustices. We attempt to make these points under the paragraph headings where they appear in the annexes to the discussion document.

5 Teaching and research

The SAH **opposed a joint teaching and research quality exercise**, convinced that it would be burdensome to operate and set up.

7c At what level should assessments be made?

The SAH believes it would be **inappropriate for individuals to be the final unit of assessment** (though of course they should be assessed as a central part of reaching a judgment about the groups to which they belong). Publishing individual assessments could lead to discrimination against people within institutions; and would magnify the risk of misjudgments within a system where assessments must be at least partly subjective (if groups are considered, there is more chance that any misjudgments about individuals will cancel each other out). However, assessing

departments has the problem that highly rated individuals working in lower rated departments are starved of funds, whilst lower rated staff in high rated departments are unfairly blessed. Although it would require sensitive handling within departments, and might lead to confusion as the SAH would try to alleviate this problem by **allowing departments to divide themselves into smaller research groups or teams for assessment.**

18b How often should research be assessed?

The SAH feels that for the humanities, the present interval of assessment every four or so years, with a six year assessment period, may lead to distortions and injustice. In the humanities, major research findings are often best presented in the form of substantial monographs. In small departments, where staff tend to have heavier teaching and administrative burdens, and where it can be harder to redistribute these to promote research, six years may not be quite long enough. This discriminates unfairly against these staff, and may force them to distort their research priorities (for instance taking time out from a major project to get some sort of output out in the six years). In addition, the current system produces overlap periods. Works published in these may unfairly and irrationally be entered into two RAEs, whilst other works cannot.

We would therefore recommend that **in the humanities**, research be assessed **every eight years**, with an **eight year assessment period**, and **no overlaps**. This would provide a reasonable interval for major projects to be completed, even by staff in smaller departments - and would have the additional effect of reducing the burden of assessment. We have no objection to staggering the assessment process, so that not all departments were assessed at the same time for the same eight year periods. If a staggered system were introduced, it would be best to start the eight year period for larger departments first, or to start this period retrospectively for them. This would give smaller ones more time to prepare for the first assessment: fair for the reasons given above.

18i Main priorities

The SAH urges a system which is primarily:

Fair;

Non-burdensome (this includes inexpensive and non time-consuming);

Clear, so it was resistant to institutional guessing or game-playing

19 Other issues

Clarity.

It is essential that the **assessment criteria are clear before the assessment period starts.** The RAEs sometimes changed or announced rules with only weeks to go before the deadline for submissions, occasionally destroying strategies which had been implemented over several preceding years. If a department told its undergraduates it would not tell them how they were to be assessed until a few days before their exams, it would – rightly – be damned by the QAA. Research assessment cannot be allowed to get away with such unprofessional (and quite possibly illegal) practice again.

Value for money.

The RAEs measured only outputs, and inputs from external bodies: but the key question in assessing the return on core public investment in research is what was produced in return for that investment. It is no surprise that places that received more core research money from the funding bodies tended to produce better research. The important question, however, was whether the research was sufficiently better to justify the extra cost. In addition to any subsidiary rating by percentage of staff entered, therefore, **we would urge a subsidiary rating, based on achievement per core research pound spent.** In fact, if this principle were adopted, any research assessment exercise could stop collecting information on external grant capture. Such external funding – if it resulted in useful outputs – would increase the results obtained per core pound spent and could be assessed in this way. If it did not result in useful outputs, it would effectively have been wasted, and departments should not be able to boast about it by including it in grant capture figures.