

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Introduction

1. We recognise that the RAE has been good for research and that it has encouraged Universities to be more self-critical. It has focussed the sector on the production of high quality research
2. The assessment methodology is satisfactory; it should continue to concentrate on research outputs.
3. However, the RAE has also been a distraction from the efficient running of a University and has focused attention away from teaching quality and non-RAE activities. Although the amount of money spent on the assessment was a small proportion of the total allocated, it would still be valuable if the process could be made less burdensome without losing its rigour.
4. The University believes that RAE submissions should contain all of the staff in an Institution .
5. It has placed young researchers in a very difficult position. Young staff may be excluded from a Unit of Assessment if the panel's guidelines do not recognise their contribution to the research effort in that Unit. Panels should be consistent and clear on this point. Secondly there may be a reluctance to appoint young researchers until their profile is at a national level. This tactic cannot be good for the health of the research culture in the UK.
6. Although commercial activities and knowledge transfer are important components of research activity we question whether there should be measurements of these activities included in the RAE. Some forms of income from industry related work have been included in the past and we would wish these to continue. In Scotland, the Funding Council has been effective in supporting commercialisation of research, knowledge transfer and developing metrics for these activities. It should not be too difficult to distinguish between commercial, or "third leg" activities and those to be included in the RAE.

Assumptions

7. We have assumed that the dual-support system will continue. The Funding Councils will, therefore, need a method of allocating funds selectively. Some method of research assessment must continue to be used for this allocation.
8. We have also assumed that UK researchers will need to compete with the best in the world. Research will therefore need to be compared with international standards.
9. Research assessment processes should be sensitive to the person-dependent nature of research. University staff have to be recruited widely, retained, motivated, and allowed to diversify and develop their careers. Staff have to be allowed to exit from a research career. Some individuals will make a greater contribution to the long-term outcomes of research, and others will

contribute more to the short-term benefits, and short-term benefits of research are easier to identify than those in the longer term.

10. The rules and processes of the RAE should be such to reward excellence in research, and not disproportionately to reward gamesmanship and presentation in the RAE submission. It is not ideal for the reward (whether in esteem or in money) to depend on moving staff from one Unit of Assessment to another.
11. Assessment by review of four submitted publications is broadly supported. However, other outputs must be admissible and should be given appropriate weight.
12. International participation in the assessment process in RAE 2001 was welcomed, and this should be enhanced in any future RAE. A method should be devised for international advisors to be present at, and to advise RAE panels at salient meetings of the panels.
13. The criteria determining grading should be consistent across panels. In particular the proportion of international quality staff that are required for a grade 5 should be standard
14. There needs to be greater differentiation at the 5 and 5* level. Perhaps 5* should be reserved for large groups of researchers which have secured a preponderance of people at international level and has reached a critical mass that would be specified by each panel.

Timing

15. We broadly welcome the indication that the next RAE is likely to be in 2008/2009. A longer rather than a shorter cycle is desirable, for example with up to seven years of stable and predictable funding, provided that volume adjustments can be made in between RAEs. However, all the research produced in the lengthened period should be eligible for inclusion and there should also be an overlap with the previous RAE period. There might be merit in timing the RAE to coincide with the Government's spending review, so that the outcome of the RAE can be taken into consideration during the review.
16. However, there are three provisos. First, this timescale is disadvantageous to new Universities formed from mergers that might be going through a transition period where research quality is being increased. A different policy is required for the allocation of research funds to newly formed amalgamations of Universities. Second, Universities that suffered financially as a result of RAE 2001 will be put at a disadvantage by this long timescale. Those Universities in Scotland that were funded for units of assessments that achieved less than grade 4 may have been able to significantly improve their research performance. Thus, thirdly, the interval between RAEs must strike a balance between stability and evolution.

New models of assessment

17. Any new model of research assessment should not be accepted without modelling of the likely outcome.
18. We do not support any proposal that a substantial part of funding council research funding be distributed in response mode. Past performance must determine most core funding. However, adequate sources of development funds, not part of the RAE settlement and available in response mode, are essential whatever model of RAE is adopted. The longer the interval between each RAE, the more response-mode core funding is needed.
19. Models based primarily on research assessment of individuals, including self-assessment, could be attractive. It should be recognised that the existing methodology of the RAE includes an element of assessment of individuals. Therefore following on the judgement of an individual's research with respect to national/international criteria it would be possible to allocate a grade and subsequently funding.
20. Models of research support where funding is distributed by an algorithmic process, related to grant income, numbers of publications, research student numbers, and the like, have little support. There would be merit in considering retrospective bibliometric analysis for the 1996 and 2001 RAEs, to see what the outcome in terms of grades and funding would have been, in comparison with the actual outcome.
21. Such algorithmic methods would have the virtue of being less laborious, but there are substantial disadvantages; the risk of local political manipulation; the perversity of rewarding expensive research; inappropriate encouragement of grant inflation and profligacy. There are also concerns that core research funding might depend inappropriately on grant funding decisions, themselves subject to unexplained variability.
22. Particular subject areas may wish for a review of the borderlines, e.g. the division between UoA 1 and UoA 3 is artificial; these should be combined.
23. Larger UoAs could increase financial turbulence following each RAE. The only solution to this would be to base funding on sub-panel grades, or on fractional grades. We believe that fractional grading should be considered, as a method of avoiding step-changes in funding.

Funding

24. While appreciating the review of the RAE is primarily of methodology, rather than of funding, the link is inescapable. On the basis of a required 100% submission all individuals would be ranked on a scale of research excellence with prices attached to the different intervals. An institution's units of assessment would be funded at the level obtained by aggregating the individual prices.

25. There is a complex mixture of staff in Universities. Some Universities depend on large numbers of Research Council and charity-funded senior academic staff. Medical school may depend disproportionately on NHS staff for their academic performance. There may also be University staff whose salary costs are partially reimbursed by the NHS; and NHS employed and funded staff who have research (and teaching) responsibilities to the University. The latter group is particularly disadvantaged by the existing system.
26. The handling of such externally funded staff needs to be reviewed, and to be equitable: in the quality assessment, in the reporting of numbers of staff returned, and in the volume driver for funding. The existing definitions of “research-active staff” are such that staff employed for teaching-only purposes may be submitted in the RAE, but will be designated as “inactive”, whilst staff employed for research-only purposes may be non-submittable.
27. The methodology of the RAE must be such that the funding outcomes cannot differ inappropriately between the four countries of the United Kingdom.