

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Research & Enterprise Board

Response to the consultation on the joint funding bodies' review of research assessment

1. Introduction

- 1.1 UWIC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review of research assessment and makes the following observations.

2. General Comments

- 2.1 UWIC recognises that the views expressed in this paper suggest that, in our opinion, little should be changed about the current method of research assessment. However, we would argue that the important issue is not the precise nature of the evidence that is examined by individual panels but rather the process by which judgements are made and the transparency of that process.
- 2.2 UWIC believes that any future review process should have clarity and transparency and it should be imperative to ensure that everyone involved in the process has a clear understanding of what is being judged and how that judgement is reached.
- 2.3 UWIC would also be interested to see a change in the way subjects are assessed. Rather than continuing with the Units of Assessment used in 2001, UWIC would prefer to see the use of thematic areas (such as arts, sciences, applied sciences, humanities). Underlying these large themes could be smaller subject specific groupings, each assessed by a truly expert panel.
- 2.4 It is felt that this approach would address the issue of multidisciplinary witnessed in 2001 when a number of units of assessment to which UWIC submitted (eg Art & Design) encompassed a wide span of disciplines. This potentially created a situation where judgements relied heavily on the views of only a small number of panellists.

3. Specific Comments

3.1 Expert Review

- 3.1.1 In UWIC's view, expert review remains the best option for a future research assessment exercise. Assessment should be a combination of prospective - evidence of strategies for development of a research culture - and retrospective - evidence of research outcomes over a specified period.
- 3.1.2 In order to make a meaningful assessment, judgement should preferably be made at an individual or possibly a group level. The difficulties of reliably assessing larger groups become too great to justify the increased effort that would be required to produce a result that could withstand scrutiny.

3.2 Algorithm

- 3.2.1 Whilst there is scope for algorithmic data to be used in certain areas of a future assessment of research, UWIC would not welcome a complete shift towards a system of this kind. UWIC believes that there are a number of flaws in the algorithms currently used and therefore an extension of this type of system would not be

welcomed.

- 3.2.2 Of major concern, should this method be adopted, would be the fact that this would not give an institution opportunity to contextualise its research activity. This would be a move away from one of the positive outcomes of the 2001 RAE which seemed to place extra weight on the contextual part of each institution's return ie RA5 & 6 than was the case in 1996.

3.3 Self Assessment

- 3.3.1 UWIC believes that it would be useful to include an element of self-assessment in a future research assessment exercise, however, it is difficult to see how a system based solely on self-assessment would work in practice and how such a system could be operated without avoiding a certain amount of "game playing".
- 3.3.2 Moreover, in order to make the process effective, a fundamental part of such a system would have to be a fairly widespread monitoring process which would in itself essentially remove much of the self-assessment role.

3.4 Historical ratings

- 3.4.1 UWIC feels that it would be completely unacceptable to adopt a system which would effectively result in the maintenance of the research "status quo". A series of presumptions would be required (initially only concerning the distribution of excellence) before such an approach could be adopted. Furthermore, it is hard to see how a reliable method (ie one capable of operating over all UoA's) could be devised to determine significant changes in performance levels.
- 3.4.2 Even if a historical ratings approach was used in conjunction with another system (as the consultation document suggests), the very hybrid nature of such an approach militates against its robustness and reliability.

3.5 Cross cutting themes

- 3.5.1 The mission of certain institutions, UWIC amongst them, focus strongly on delivering support for social, cultural and economic development. This mission is reflected in all aspects of such institutions' work, including research. In research terms, this can mean that many research based programmes also include a significant amount of knowledge transfer in addition to the knowledge development and creation inherent in research activity. UWIC would like to see future research assessments place greater value on the social, cultural and economic impact made by an institution's research. A peripheral benefit which might flow from this is that research assessment might become more meaningful for the wider economy.
- 3.5.2 UWIC agrees that research should be assessed on a regular and rolling basis. It is felt that the rolling basis should more realistically reflect the pace at which change is likely to be achieved.
- 3.5.3 UWIC strongly believes that each institution should be assessed in the same way but that recognition should be given to the institutional context within which research takes place. On the question of assessing different subjects or groups of cognate subjects, UWIC believes that transparency and equivalence are key issues. However, this does not mean that UWIC would support the adoption of an identical approach for each unit of assessment (UoA). UWIC believes that the assessment methods in each UoA should, subject to issues of transparency and equivalence, be designed to

reflect the characteristics of research within that subject discipline. UWIC was broadly satisfied with the approach to identifying appropriate assessment criteria for each UoA in 2001 but would wish to see this approach extended to allow greater variation of assessment methodology in different UoA's.

- 3.5.4 In UWIC's view, institutions should continue to retain maximum discretion when putting together their submissions to future research assessment exercises.
- 3.5.5 The balance between small numbers of "international" citations (for a high rating) and the demonstration of a larger critical mass of research-active staff is seen as a distracting game. A broad mix of past performance, future strategy, evidence of ability to continue to develop and critical mass, should drive both funding and rating. At present a very small number of high level citations can be rewarded with a 5 or 5* rating, but little funding. Institutions that choose to do this are calculating that the PR value of the rating is higher than the likely overall benefits of a return based on a larger critical mass.

UWIC
November 02