

JOINT FUNDING BODIES' REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT RESPONSE BY BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

General

Brunel University supports the continuation of the dual support system for funding research in HEIs. It also supports the use of RAE quality and volume data for the allocation of research funds by HEFCE.

We believe that the RAE should be based on peer review. However, the RAE processes must be transparent, evidence based, and rigorous so that decisions on research quality have credibility and enjoy the confidence of the HEI sector. At the same time, the submission process should not be unduly burdensome.

The University considers that it is of great importance that the outcome of a future RAE is fully funded; otherwise the confidence of the HE community in the exercise would be undermined.

Definition of research quality

The University believes that research quality is a combination of both intellectual excellence and the impact of research outputs, both, within and beyond the research community itself. Consequently, the assessment processes should endeavour to assess, in addition to the intellectual excellence of the research, the impact of research outputs on the peer community and on the lives of the people in the national and international communities. However, the University also recognises that research impact may not be an appropriate criterion or may be problematic to assess in certain disciplines and research areas.

Approaches to assessment

Of the various approaches to assessment, the University would favour the continuation of the current peer review system based on a combination of numerical and qualitative evidence. However, where appropriate to the discipline or type of research undertaken, the University would favour an extension of the current methodology to include a more direct assessment of the impact of research outputs on the local and international economies and communities at large. Approaches which place undue reliance on mechanistic assessment would not be favoured, while at the same time the University would be concerned over approaches which allow departures from evidence and reliance on impressions. The University would also advocate that panel membership should continue to be drawn from nominations made openly by the wider academic, research, and professional communities.

Cross Cutting themes

(a) Purpose of the RAE

The University would like the RAE to continue to be the means by which the bulk of the research funding is allocated across the HEIs. A beneficial side-benefit of the RAE is the provision of a comprehensive set of data on research activity across the UK HE sector. These data is useful for benchmarking the performance of individual academic units within an HEI and, perhaps, for comparing the performance of the UK HE sector with those in North American and EU countries, and Japan.

(b) Frequency of the RAE

A case can be made for academic units with top ratings (5 and 5*) being assessed over a longer time scale, say 8 to 10 years, so as to reduce the burden of assessment. However, a timescale of 5 or so years could be an option available for lower ratings, as this would maintain dynamism and drive for improvement. The University would not favour research assessment on a rolling basis, as it could find itself under a continual burdensome assessment regime, which would be forever diverting some of its energies away from the core activities of teaching and research. University-wide strategies would also become more difficult to plan and achieve with a multiplicity of milestones spread across the University subject areas and over several years.

(c) Excellence in research

The University believes that research excellence is primarily characterised by the intellectual quality of outputs. However, in several disciplines, the impact of the research outputs, particularly in improving people's lives and their environment is also an indicator of research excellence.

- (d) The influence of the RAE on the proportion of funds allocated to each subject?

The University believes that the RAE ratings and subject cost weights by themselves cannot be used to determine the proportion of funding allocated to each subject area. For example, the RAE methodology may favour less some research areas such as social work, nursing, and education, where the focus may be more national than international. It could be argued that national research priorities could also require funding distributions which would be different from those based purely on RAE ratings and cost weights.

- (e) Uniformity in the assessment of HEIs

The University believes that all HEIs should be assessed with the same methodology and criteria, if the RAE ratings are to retain their credibility. It is also difficult to justify why in an increasingly international research arena, a subject area in university X should be assessed for research excellence using a different methodology or criteria than the same subject area in university Y.

- (f) Assessment of each subject or group of cognate subjects

Notwithstanding the difficulties mentioned in item (d) above for some subject areas, the RAE should produce ratings which are benchmarked at the international level across almost all subject areas.

- (g) Discretion left to institutions in putting together their submissions

The last RAE allowed HEIs considerable discretion in selecting the staff to be submitted and in grouping researchers into a specific unit of assessment. The University considers this discretion to be necessary, but it is also aware that it could also allow some institutions to make tactical submissions and thereby enhance their ratings.

- (h) Achieving equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education

The University believes that HEIs should continue to select the staff they wish to submit. In this way, only staff producing outputs at the national/international level would be funded. Furthermore, staff with excellent research outputs will not run the risk of not being funded because of dilution of a submission with, for example, research active staff still in the formative stage of their career.