

## **Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment Response from the Arts Institute at Bournemouth**

### **Background**

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth is a small, specialist HEI which concentrates on enabling learning for students who wish to fulfil their creative potential and meet the needs of the creative industries. Its Mission Statement is as follows:

***The Arts Institute at Bournemouth is a University Sector College, committed to being a leading provider of education opportunities in arts, design and media. We believe in equality of opportunity within an academic framework that provides strong support for learning, teaching and professional achievement.***

***In pursuit of excellence the Institute seeks to offer an all-through provision to postgraduate level study. This is provided within an environment in which research and the acquisition of skills and knowledge are directed towards the production of innovative and creative work to realise each student's potential.***

The ideas that underpin the Mission are based upon principles for an Institute which

- Is specialist in its character and curriculum offer
- Aspires to provide high quality in learning and teaching for regional, national and international students
- Offers all-through provision with the opportunity to progress to advanced studies in arts, design and media disciplines
- Enhances the range of curriculum opportunities in the region and specialist sector while supporting widening participation objectives
- Supports research, scholarship and professional practice
- Embraces the value of collaboration and partnerships to meet the needs of staff, students and employers
- Aspires to be a self-critical and reflective academic community
- Offers high quality vocational education in support of the creative industries

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth (AIB), formerly the Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design (BPCAD), was established in 1883. We are a specialist college, one of 15 monotechnic providers of courses in art, design and media, with a commitment to providing all-through progression from Junior Art School through FE to HE. The Institute aspires to put students and their work at its centre, by providing a student-centred approach to learning within a supportive academic community that offers a professional working ethos encouraging learning by and through practice. Academic delivery and quality systems support complementarity between courses whilst maintaining a tradition of specialism.

### **The Arts Institute at Bournemouth and Research**

The Arts Institute became an HEI in August 2001 and so was not eligible to take part in the previous RAE rounds. However, there is a tradition of research activity taking place at the Institute, and members of staff have been recruited recently with experience of submission in the RAE at other HEIs. There is therefore an emerging research culture at AIB, which supports academic research for publication but, more significantly, supports research into teaching and learning and into the facilitation of knowledge transfer and application in design specialisms. It is from this basis that AIB has responded to the review of research assessment.

### **Approaches to Assessment**

#### **1. Expert Review**

- a. Whilst the good sense of retrospective assessment is recognised for institutions building a research on culture and profile there needs to be a prospective element to this.
- b. Assessors should consider objective data, including details of publications, conference papers and other public output. In terms of art, design and media this should encompass exhibitions, designed artifacts and electronically transmitted materials.
- c. Assessments should be made of departments, research groupings or HEIs as a whole, if they are small and specialist.
- d. The assessment of research around subject groupings is probably unavoidable. However, there were possibly too many subject subdivisions in past RAE rounds, leading to a burdensome level of detail. Efforts should be made to group subjects into no more than twenty disciplinary areas. For example, art and design could include creative media and the history of art, design and architecture. Languages could represent one subject grouping. This would reflect the convergence which is taking place across many subject areas.
- e. The major strength of this system is that the judgements are made by subject experts who are peers. The major weakness is that it is open to gamesplaying as organisations become more adept at playing the system.

## **2. Algorithm**

- a. It may be acceptable to assess research entirely on the basis of metrics, but these would need to be carefully selected and applicable to all subject areas.
- b. Available metrics would include publications, citations, external research income, research student numbers and completions.
- c. It would appear that these metrics could be combined to generate an accurate picture of the location of research strength.
- d. If this approach was adopted then it may influence the behaviour of the academic community, leading to energies being directed into the generation of success against the identified indices.
- e. The major strength of this approach is its comparative objectivity. Its weakness is the need to produce objective metrics which would not influence behaviours too greatly.

## **3. Self-Assessment**

- a. The self-assessment could include much of the data outlined under the 'Algorithm' section above, that is, publications, citations, external research income, research student numbers and completions. Other information to be included might be a research strategy with associated aims and objectives with which to measure success against.
- b. The assessment should be largely retrospective but, with the possible inclusion of a strategy, there would be an element of prospective material.
- c. The criteria to be applied to each institution's work should be measures of success gauged against the strategy outlined in a. Each institution could offer their own criteria for the measurement of success against their own objectives. These will include generic criteria, common to all subjects, for example, public output or citation. Depending on the individual strategy, institutions may choose to pursue research which aligns closely with teaching and learning or with knowledge transfer, which should be given equal credence as compared to pure, academic research.
- d. A credible validation of an institution's own work could be carried out through selective audit or through external verification through references.
- e. Such a self-assessment process would be as burdensome as the expert review, but would give each institution more ownership of the process and of the development of their own research profile. It would also recognise the heterogeneous nature of the sector and the differences between subjects.
- f. The major strength of this approach is it reflects a more mature sector, with organisations taking more responsibility for their own research development by setting their own agendas. The weakness of such an approach would be that it needs external verification in the form of selective audit or reference.

## **4. Historical Ratings**

- a. The recognition that the distribution of research strengths will change only slowly is a realistic one. Rewards for success in terms of value added or value for money are to be welcomed. For an organisation such as the AIB, there will be no historical data to build upon.
- b. Baseline ratings could be centred around past RAE performance, research student success, attraction of external funding and strategic development of research in the institution. The historical trajectory of research could then be evaluated over a ten year period.

- c. The consideration of an historical trajectory which included information on funding received and results obtained, could then be used to identify failing institutions or institutions outperforming expectations. A value for money element should certainly be included with the analysis and given recognition.
- d. Such a model would influence organisational behaviour in positive terms. There should be a renewed striving for excellence and drive to achieve more with less. This would encourage those UOAs who have not achieved 5 or 5\* ratings to continue to make sustained efforts to succeed, rather than rewarding those who already enjoy the major share of resources with more resources at the expense of those who have more capacity to realise their full potential.
- e. The major strength of this approach is its inclusivity. All HEIs must undertake research activity to inform their teaching and learning and their knowledge transfer activity. It would be to the detriment of the HE sector as a whole if it is only traditional research carried out at well established institutions which is supported and funded.

## **5. Crosscutting Themes**

- a. As assessment of the research base should be used in gauging and monitoring the development of research activity and its contribution to the national economy. It should also be used for targeted funding.
- b. To provide a meaningful picture, research should be assessed every five years. The past RAE gap of four years was probably too frequent, but any longer than five years and the data will be less meaningful for monitoring purposes. It should certainly be on a rolling basis.
- c. Excellence in research could be defined as the generation of innovative material which presents a new view of accepted wisdom and is of international significance.
- d. Different subjects have varying demands for funding with the 'hard' sciences at one end and the humanities at the other. Therefore, funding will vary across disciplines and should be based around the assessment of research.
- e. Each institution cannot be assessed in the same way. For example, AIB has no previous track record of entry into the RAE but, as an HEI, needs to undertake supported research to underpin its teaching and learning activity. This is why a system of self-assessment, which mirrors QAA practice in terms of Audit, would be most appropriate.
- f. Each subject or group of cognate subjects should be assessed in the same way as far as is possible, using generic criteria. It is the ordering of the subjects themselves which could be realigned.
- g. The RAE is proscriptive in terms of the information it demands. Therefore, a system which allowed for more discretion from institutions which make up a very diverse sector, would be welcomed.
- h. A research assessment process which recognises the diversity of the HE sector would be welcomed. Rather than impose a hierarchical ordering of research achievement in which some HE staff feel honoured whilst others feel devalued is clearly undesirable. A system which rewards value added and achievement with less traditional terms would be appropriate to HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Teaching and learning, widening participation and knowledge transfer should be equally valued within the funding system.
- i. The most important features of an assessment process should be transparency and a model which enhances and encourages, rather than reinforces existing hierarchies and boundaries.