

## **ASTON UNIVERSITY RESPONSE TO THE JOINT FUNDING BODIES' REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT**

**Aston University** welcomes the decision of the four UK funding bodies to review the means by which research at UK Higher Education institutions is assessed, and is pleased to take this opportunity to contribute to the debate. This submission represents a corporate view compiled on the basis of consideration of the consultation document throughout the University; it covers general points relating to research assessment as well as addressing specific questions posed in the document.

In the event of any queries, please contact Liz Hindson, Research Administrative Assistant in the Pro-Vice-Chancellors' Office. Tel: 0121-359 3611, ext. 4789. E-mail address: [e.hindson@aston.ac.uk](mailto:e.hindson@aston.ac.uk).

### **General Comment**

1. This review of research assessment procedures is overdue since little attempt was made after the 1996 RAE to engage the academic community in any consultation process of a similar scale. The sole justification for the existence of the RAE is its use as a means of determining the distribution amongst institutions of a limited and inadequate supply of money. It is important, therefore, that the unacceptable way in which the whole question of financial rewards for high RAE 2000 ratings has been handled must be avoided in future exercises.
2. The timing of future exercises should reflect the need to balance predictability and stability of funding with encouragement of strategic development within specific subject areas. If the next exercise is not to take place before 2008, thought should be given to making an elective interim assessment available after a five year period (i.e. in 2005). This would enable institutions to submit individual subject areas, provided a satisfactory prima facie case could be made, for interim assessment at their own cost.
3. The philosophical, or perhaps more correctly, theoretical question "what is meant by quality in research?" produces a wide range of answers reflecting the different intellectual viewpoints across academic disciplines. There is a general view that in every field, genuine research and the intellectual excellence that accompanies it has always radiated beyond the research community and will continue to do so. In many subject areas, high quality applied research is as important to the nation as "pure" research. In view of the purpose of the RAE (point 1) "fitness for purpose" is the central issue. It

might be assumed that RAE panels had by now decided on suitable subject-oriented parameters and there is little point in re-inventing the wheel by debating the meaning of research at this late stage. More importantly, the process should be refined to ensure that it is: transparent, fair, clearly defined, rigorous and stable.

4. There is a growing emphasis on collaboration between disciplines and between institutions. It is likely that this trend will increase in the period leading to the next assessment exercise. It is important, therefore, that the process should incorporate mechanisms to recognise and promote, rather than inhibit, collaboration within and between institutions. Similarly it is important to recognise the difference between "interdisciplinarity" and mere "multidisciplinarity"; the latter does not imply any actual cross-disciplinary discourse, let alone the intellectual/thematic interaction between disciplines. Therefore "multidisciplinarity" as a concept is of limited use in connection with research in the Humanities.

## **Specific Responses**

### *Expert Review*

5. Expert review complemented by quantitative metrics has substantial advantages over self-assessment and historical ratings. The experience and knowledge base now to hand from the series of previous RAEs should be employed to best advantage in subsequent exercises, but with modifications in content and emphasis. Clearly defined metrics will be needed and it is essential that these are communicated early for each assessment unit.
6. One extremely problematic consequence of the RAE has been that it has seriously undermined the cohesion between teaching and research. The differentiation between, in effect, teaching departments and research departments implies the dissociation of these two vital sides of academia. Combined assessment of teaching and research in an exercise involving the whole sector is not a realistic option.
7. A combination of past (retrospective) and future (directional, prospective) assessment should be used. This means that assessment units are evaluated against extent of achieving stated objectives and targets, in addition to their vision, mission and strategy in relation to the achievement of future goals. Panels must accept, however, that their own ability to predict actual future performance is limited.

8. Assessment should be based on departments/subject groups, not individuals; given that most institutions are structured around subjects/disciplines and themes it may not be feasible to depart from this pattern of assessment. There is no intellectual reason for any major reduction of the number of subject areas compared with previous exercises. The existence of a wide range of panels ensures that work is reviewed by experts who are thoroughly familiar with the practices, discourses, constraints and opportunities that the area presents, and this should not be lost.
9. There is partial overlap between some existing UoAs (e.g. 9 and 11). There is a strong case for initial vetting of submissions so that categorisation into related UoAs is appropriate and fair. There should be clear evidence and audit of cross-referencing between panels to ensure comparability in weighting of parameters, where appropriate.
10. A clear statement as to the role and responsibility of the international assessors needs to be made. If the international reputation of research groups is to be given greater significance, consideration must be given to methods of assessing this and to appointing a larger panel of international assessors to complement more fully the UK UoA panels.

### *Algorithm*

11. Although, in principle, it is possible to assess research entirely on metrics, the result would not provide an overall picture of research strengths, encompassing ethos and vision, as does the present system. It would encourage institutions to concentrate on measurables to the detriment of research ambition, leadership and substance.
12. Metrics do form an important part in research assessment and in order that they are able to contribute to the rigour and transparency of the process they must be clearly configured and communicated early for each assessment unit. Subjective and judgmental assessment is less desirable for obvious reasons - flawed judgements and erroneous or biased evaluations based on criteria that are not transparent cannot be challenged in any effective way. For that reason criteria used to evaluate non-quantitative aspects of a submission must also be clear, unambiguous and communicated early.

13. A clear definition is needed with respect to terms such as "quality of refereeing" (by a particular journal or other publishing outlet) which was used in some UoAs as an index for assessing the quality of publications. The same is true of other factors that have been cited as relevant in the assessment of submissions including: journal rankings, citations, survey-based reputation; policy impacts and conversion ratios (e.g. quality of research outputs per £ expended). It must also be recognised that such semi-quantitative criteria cannot replace authentic evaluation of intellectual quality.
14. Research grants should be treated as one performance indicator amongst others and, in the Humanities (except perhaps Social Studies and other subjects covered by the ESRC) not necessarily the most important one. It is vitally important that the assessment should not be solely input-driven.

### ***Self-Assessment***

15. We do not favour an approach wholly based on self-assessment. Self-assessment can only work if contextualized by a system of peer review and external monitoring; it would probably turn out to be at least as burdensome as the present process.
16. It may be that thought should be given to the development of a self-assessment component within the exercise. This requires the establishment of a structured process/procedure for undertaking the assessment and that raises several problems. There do not appear to be obvious benchmarks to learn from (e.g. self-assessment of taxation) and we do not have sufficient experience or knowledge to gauge effectiveness. Irrespective of whether a prospective, retrospective or combined approach is favoured, self-assessments would have to embrace metrics that leave little room for ambiguity in reporting and the process would thereby become too rigid and thus meaningless to diverse groups that do not fit the standard mould.

### ***Historical Ratings***

17. The sole use of historical ratings will only cement the *status quo* of a hierarchical university structure. There is no apparent basis - and none is advanced - for any presumption that the distribution of excellence would remain stable over time. There is value in sustained, rather than purely historical performance but the dynamics of individual subject areas, as well as that of individual universities, must be reflected in reward. On the other hand there may be a case for including a small element of historical

performance - this would damp down fluctuations in performance and help in long-term planning.

### *Cross-cutting Themes*

18. Some comment has been made in the introductory section on cross-cutting themes that appeared to be fundamental to the exercise, rather than the process (such as the purpose of the research exercise and the question of research quality).
19. There is broad support across the institution for a rolling process of assessment. An assessment of this type could be phased to give sufficient time for strategic plans to come to fruition, enabling institutions to think long term and build realistically for the future rather than develop tactically. Research assessed on a rolling basis could account for the natural ebb and flow that occurs in research achievement and would help to inhibit the damaging effect of “staff poaching” prior to the RAE exercise. If a period of assessment needs to be specified, then 7 years is broadly felt to be appropriate. There is a recognition that in special circumstances it would be desirable to permit institutions to submit individual subject areas, provided a satisfactory prima facie case could be made, for interim assessment at their own cost.
20. It is important to know in advance of the exercise whether or not the outcome of the assessment process will inform the distribution of funds between subjects. Similarly the total funding available for allocation should be identified at the start of the assessment process. We believe that it is impossible to compare the relative quality of research in different subject areas and that the "subject pots" should be determined by a mixture of the suggested methodologies.
21. We believe that each institution should be assessed in the same way, in order that research performance in the same subject area across different institutions may be compared.
22. Cognate subject groups and disciplines should be assessed in the same way. The parameters used should be clearly defined and more prescriptive. The relative weightings of parameters will necessarily be different between different subject areas, however. It would be unreasonable, for example, to use research income as an equivalent indicator of quality in Engineering and in Business & Management or the Humanities. It will be necessary to establish universal and subject-specific parameters together with their relative weightings well in advance of the conduct of the exercise.

23. The degree of discretion given to institutions in preparing their submissions should be unchanged.
24. A research assessment exercise is by nature discriminatory. It cannot therefore be designed to support equality of treatment for all groups of staff. There are serious and substantial equal opportunities issues which arise, but these can only be addressed in the context of overall HE policy, social changes in attitudes to work-life balance and adequate resourcing for HE as a whole. If equality of treatment and opportunity were to be seen as a priority, this might logically lead to longer intervals between RAE exercises, a reduction in the number of pieces of work/output to be considered, and a stronger emphasis upon quality judgements, which would involve reading and peer reviewing all work submitted, since this approach would address at least some of the gender-related issues.
25. The three most important aspects of the revised process are that it should be transparent, fair and rigorous (in terms of both administration of the exercise and the assessment process itself).