

Review of Research Assessment Queen Mary, University of London

The College Research Board has considered the paper "Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment - Invitation to contribute. Disciplines throughout the College have discussed the paper and provided input to this College response. Two detailed responses (from the School of Medicine and Dentistry and the School of English and Drama) are sent with this response as they represent the range of views across the College.

Below is a summary of the College's view, based on the question in Annex B.

General comment

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has provided a means for the funding bodies to allocate resources. It is this fact which has led to the high profile of the RAE and to the importance with which universities have placed in the results of the RAE. The Review of the Research Assessment needs to accept this as the basis for future proposals for research assessment. The link between assessment and resource allocation determines the credibility of the method. Thus **both** the method of assessment **and** the resource allocation method need to be transparent, rigorous and fair.

Comments on methods of assessment:

Group 1: Expert Review

- [a] There is general support for expert review as a method of assessment, with the department [or equivalent] being the unit of assessment;
- [b] The proviso that for any future expert review assessment, there should be greater transparency in the selection of members of review panels;
- [c] There should be a combination of retrospective and prospective assessment;
- [d] Expert review, or peer review, is used internationally and nationally as the prime method of assessing research and is well understood and respected over a long period of time.

Group 2: Algorithm

- [a] Assessment by algorithm is not favoured, as it is not suitable for humanities research, and would be difficult to apply with any degree of sensitivity in some scientific and medical areas;
- [b] Assessment by algorithm would discriminate against departments with predominantly young staff.

Group 3: Self-Assessment

- [a] To be effective, a self-assessment scheme would require clear guidelines and robust systems of monitoring and validation;
- [b] Although the humanities sector could see definite advantages in self-assessment as a form of in-house expert review in which departments were in control of the application of their own data, other sectors were more doubtful;
- [c] Concern was expressed that self-assessment could result in increased imposition of bureaucratic

Group 4: Historical Ratings

There is no support for assessment by historical ratings, which would only reinforce historical decisions at the expense of rewarding productivity and new ideas.

Group 5: Crosscutting themes

a. What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?

Assessment of the research base should be used to allocate research funding.

b. How often should research be assessed? Should it be on a rolling basis?

Research should be assessed at no less than five-yearly intervals. A rolling programme would spread the load in institutions, but is not favoured, partly because it could encourage institutions to allocate funding on the basis of the programme's timetable.

c. *What is excellence in research?*

Recognition by international and national peers that the research is potentially one or more of: novel, innovative, ground-breaking, wealth-creating.

d. *Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?*

Research assessment should be used to determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject.

e. *Should each institution be assessed in the same way?*

All institutions should be assessed in the same way.

f. *Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?*

All subjects need not be assessed in the same way, but cognate subjects should be assessed in the same way.

g. *How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their submissions?*

There would be no need for institutions to be given discretion in putting together their submissions if clear guidelines on who, and what, should be submitted were laid down in advance and not changed during the exercise.

h. *How can a research assessment process be designed to support equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education?*

Research assessment should not be used as a method solving other issues. All HEIs have strategies and policies for dealing with equal opportunities in their Human Resources Strategies. These usually take a whole institution approach which attempts to embed equal opportunities into all areas of activity.

i. *Priorities: what are the three most important features of an assessment process?*

The three most important features are that it should be **transparent**, **administratively efficient** and **flexible** (so that changes in policy can be accommodated without redesigning the entire process).

Other points - Interdisciplinary Research

Previous research assessment exercises did not allow for sufficient weight to be given to interdisciplinary research. Any future exercise should incorporate mechanisms for the evaluation of interdisciplinary work.

**Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment
Response from Bart's and the London
Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry**

Group 1: Expert review

In providing your advice, you are asked to consider the following questions:

a. Should the assessments be prospective, retrospective or a combination of the two?

Combination: Retrospective should give an indication of current and most recent performance but prospective is important given frequent long time scale before investments in staff/infrastructure come to fruition.

b. What objective data should assessors consider?

Current performance indicators are appropriate and it is difficult to see how to improve upon them: expenditure/PDRA's/PhD throughout the assessment period/publication quality and output. However, it is vitally important in the case of medicine, that appropriate reviewers and indicators are selected for the "craft specialties" (eg surgery, urology) which are unlikely to be able to compete with some of the larger groupings, such as cancer/cardiovascular disease research, but which nonetheless are important research areas. Unless we acknowledge the need to protect these disciplines and put in place suitable assessment measures there is a danger that these research disciplines could disappear entirely.

Uncertain of the value of RA6 weighting? Marks of esteem –Awards & prizes/invitation lectures/Editorial Boards/Funding body panel membership

c. At what level should assessments be made – individuals, groups, departments, research institutes, or higher education institutions?

HEI's - the potential for internal divisions within an HEI if groups/depts./inst are competing against one another are too dreadful to contemplate

d. Is there an alternative to organising the assessment around subjects or thematic areas? If this is unavoidable, roughly how many should there be?

Combine current UoA 1&3? Too artificial a division and doesn't reflect the lab/clinical interface that is evident in many areas.

Would retain UoA2 given the distinctive nature of research in this area and specialist review requirements but requires more representation of HSR on the panel

e. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

Must not only be fair but be seen to be fair.

Panel composition is critical and a transparent process of panel selection with broader representation across HEI's essential. Greater usage of more neutral reviewers would be beneficial – eg international reviewers/industry. As described selection of reviewers Able critically and objectively to analyse the craft specialty disciplines is essential.

The medical panels should contain representatives from the NHS and from all Medical Schools. Hitherto, the RAE has tended to operate to the disadvantage of Clinical Medicine, as opposed to basic science, although the former may carry major importance in terms of future patient care, contribution to the economy and capacity building through training.

Group 2: Algorithm

You have been asked in providing your advice to consider the following questions:

- Is it, in principle, acceptable to assess research entirely on the basis of metrics?

Should only provide adjunctive information

b. What metrics are available?

If this system of assessment is to be used then more sophisticated metrics should be considered. Impact factors alone are good demonstrators for the pure sciences however not a fair judgement of more applied research. Other measures such as patent filings and successful knowledge transfer, time to completion of successful PhD's and other research degrees should be considered.

Critical that the influence of the proportion of returned staff on the overall score is known in advance. Alternatively should be compulsory for all HEFCE funded to be included in the submission.

c. Can the available metrics be combined to provide an accurate picture of the location of research strength?

Metrics alone are inadequate

d. If funding were tied to the available metrics, what effects would this have upon behaviour? Would the metrics themselves continue to be reliable?

Open to manipulation

e. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

+ Probably less time consuming and more predictive

- Open to manipulation

Group 3: Self-assessment

In providing your advice, you are asked to consider the following questions:

a. What data might we require institutions to include in their self-assessments?

b. Should the assessments be prospective, retrospective or a combination of the two?

c. What criteria should institutions be obliged to apply to their own work. Should these be the same in each institution or each subject?

d. How might we credibly validate institutions' own assessment of their own work?

e. Would self-assessment be more or less burdensome than expert review?

f. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach

Regard self assessment as a minor indicator of research performance unless it is based upon attaining targets set by the assessor. These would have to vary between HEI's to acknowledge the current positions. Hard to envisage how this could work in practice.

Group 4: Historical ratings

Assume you have been asked to advise on how such a system might work. In developing your advice, you have been asked to consider the following questions:

a. Is it acceptable to employ a system that effectively acknowledges that the distribution of research strength is likely to change very slowly?

**No. Research strength in a given area can change quickly through targeted investment/recruitment.
Unfair on many HEI's to assess on previous/historical performance**

b. What measures should be used to establish each institution's baseline ratings?

Could probably one be done using existing RAE ratings and for reasons given above this is would be unfair to those HEI's who have made concerted efforts to improve

c. What mechanism might be used to identify failing institutions or institutions outperforming expectations? Could it involve a 'value for money' element?

?

d. What would be the likely effects upon behaviour?

?

e. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

Too inflexible and lacks competition

Group 5: Crosscutting themes

You have been asked to provide advice to the funding councils on the following fundamental issues:

a. What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?

Financial reward – if dual support system continues

Areas of research requiring investment

Advising training needs

b. How often should research be assessed? Should it be on a rolling basis?

No less than 5 year cycle

c. What is excellence in research?

In no particular order, research excellence should:

provide intellectual stimulation

be ground breaking (ie develop new areas for exploration or alternative ways of examining existing problems)

be good value for money

in some instances feed the development of new technology/therapeutics/commerce

in the case of medicine, have impact on patient care

be accessible to the general population

d. Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?

Not necessarily. Should take into account the costs of doing research in different areas/potential for alternative funding (eg industrial), the need to develop different areas

e. Should each institution be assessed in the same way?

? Handicapping system? may be appropriate to acknowledge uneven playing field with respect to research institutes vs traditional HEI structures

f. Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?

Probably a case for assessing sectors differently

g. How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their

submissions?

In the interests of fairness a unitary approach is probably required

i. Priorities: what are the most important features of an assessment process?

Transparency

Fairness and neutrality of review

Broad representation

Adequate funding!

Prior publication of the rules (eg effect of proportion of staff returned on eligibility for high grades)

Others??

Group 6: Have we missed anything?

We invite respondents to tell us whether there are other issues or options not considered here. In particular, we would be interested to hear of any approach to research assessment that could not be described as a variant of the approaches listed above.

The agenda and mission of the RAE need to be explicitly described at a very early stage in the process. This is to include the political agenda, NHS agenda and whether the purpose is to close down smaller institutions and concentrate research into centres of excellence. These principles should be clear, transparent and not subject to arbitrary changes of reinterpretation during the course of the exercise.

The funding stream should be announced beforehand, then institutions would know what they were aiming for and self-assessment would therefore be part of the process.

Embedded units such CRUK researchers within the Institution should be included in submission. Category A/Category C staff should be merged.

A cost:benefit analysis of any proposed RAE system should be performed prior to implementation. This should include not only central HEFCE administrative costs but also an estimate of costs to HEI's in terms of administrative and academic staff time spent in preparation of their RAE submissions.

Specifically in relation to UoA2:

There is a clear impression—reinforced by feedback that QM has received on the RAE - that there is a tension between the criteria of excellence applied to RAE submissions, and the type of work which is undertaken in collaboration with, and which is highly valued by, the local community and the health service. This tension can also have an impact on funding agencies, and thereby reduce the opportunities open to College researchers. This is particularly relevant in relation to efforts to secure support for, and recruitment of, postgraduate students. Paradoxically the need to increase the number of postgraduate research students was highlighted by the RAE report, and many organisations operate eligibility criteria based on RAE score, inevitably making our task harder.

There is a further tension between recognition of the importance of the RAE, and of securing a high score, with the attendant financial benefits, the maintenance of effective relationships with the community and with the NHS and seeking to implement Government priorities. Considerable effort has gone into developing close working relationships with NHS partners and the new strategic health authority and this could be undermined by a reduction in resources. It is of particular concern that the opportunity to create working research partnerships with new primary care organisations from the outset could be lost.

A dynamic synergy between communities and researchers may fall victim to a narrow, overcentralised and elitist review of health sciences research.

Response from School of English and Drama, Queen Mary, University of London

Before proceeding to the numbered responses, as requested, we would wish to make the following general observations:

- a) Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research is now predominant in research active departments of English and Drama. Any future research assessment exercise must include adequate provision to assess work which whilst falling squarely within a single RAE unit of assessment, crosses disciplinary boundaries and requires expert assessment as such.
- b) Inter-institutional Centres and research groups are now a standard feature of the humanities research landscape, encouraged and supported by the major grant-giving bodies. Any future research assessment exercise must be such as both to recognize such activities for the added value and heightened research profile given to both institutions, and actively to encourage such research activity for the future.
- c) The AHRB and other funding bodies now explicitly encourage research in the humanities which bridges between a 'general' and a 'specialist' audience, increasing the dissemination of knowledge to the wider community. Any future research assessment exercise must be such as to credit individual departments adequately for such public-friendly research.

Group 1: Expert review

Expert review remains an acceptable means of assessment with the following provisos:

- a) Assessment should be a combination of retrospective (established reputation) and prospective (future room for improvement to excellence)
- b) Assessors should consider a range of output, reflecting the type of research activity. Submissions might be made as grouped items of work, led by senior strength, and supported by junior work-in-progress, and team submissions
- c) Assessment should continue to be made at the level of groups as they function within an institution on a day-to-day basis – i.e. departments and schools
- d) Subject areas are the only stable foci for research assessment. We have no views on the number there should be, except to say that broad 'clumpings' are unlikely to produce clarity in attempts to measure quality of output
- e) The major weakness of this system, as evidenced by past practice, is limitations on areas of expertise within individual panels. Experts must be drawn from a broad enough spectrum within a discipline to enable informed judgments to be formed on all work submitted

Group 2: Algorithm

Algorithmic measures of research output are generally poorly suited to humanities research, largely because they have been explicitly designed for the very different and distinctive culture of science publications. We do not believe citation indices or other bibliometric measures capture humanities research adequately, and we therefore offer no detailed answers for this part of the consultation document. However, the following quantitative measures are relevant to humanities research:

- research student numbers (or completions)
- external research income

Group 3: Self-assessment

We are strongly in favour of a self-assessment system of research assessment, which is robust enough to be taken seriously. Indeed, we believe that within the framework of the existing RAE, the system could be made more sensitive and responsive to quality as a self-assessment system.

- a) The data for self-assessment could be close to that currently called for by the RAE, but could be more appropriately assessed in house. In-house scrutiny of individual submissions would be informed and thorough and appropriate experts would be likely to be in-house (by the very nature of that department or section's activities)
- b) Continuous in-house monitoring could combine prospective and retrospective elements to produce a realistic measure of an individual's research profile and its development
- c) Each institution could use the expert criteria appropriate to each specialist field, as decided by individual specialisms at a national level
- d) External assessors would provide confirmation of standards and assure cross-institutional parity and standards (on the model of Ofsted inspection as currently practiced)
- e) Self assessment would be less burdensome because it could form part of a constructive process of research development
- f) Although self-assessment is always expected to lead to manipulation of data and results by the institution, in practice (as seen in secondary school inspection) it does not do so, and can be a valuable part of the institution's internal management and development

Group 4: Historical ratings

We are strongly opposed to the use of historical ratings. Such an approach will inevitably lead to deteriorating quality in the 'top'-rated organizations, and inhibit research improvement elsewhere. We offer the following reasons against using historical ratings:

- Research infrastructure is traditional associated in the humanities with the older, traditional universities, and is in no way a measure of research activity or its quality. Indeed, the correlation tends to go the other way.

- Research in the humanities tends to improve and to decline slowly rather than sharply. This tendency would be amplified by using historical ratings to allocate research funding
- There would be an inevitable drift of research-active staff from cash-poor to cash-rich institutions, because of the slow rate of change, increasing the divide between research and teaching institutions to the detriment of students

Group 5: Crosscutting themes

In response to the general questions under this heading our view is as follows:

- a) Assessment of the research base must continue to be used to target research funding to high-performance institutions. Otherwise, in a cash-poor sector we all get poorer together
- b) Research should be assessed not more than every 5 years. Our experience of student continuous assessment is that it may inhibit the taking of risk and being bold which are essential to high-quality research
- c) Excellence in research is a combination of: work acknowledged by the field as moving the field significantly forward; quality of output as agreed by the peer group in each academic community; research potential as evidenced by the ability to attract external funding; international recognition as evidenced by collaborations and invitations overseas; ability to attract research students and take them to the successful completion of their PhDs
- d) Research performance might be used to decide whether research funding might be transferred from one discipline to another – there is measurable evidence of buoyancy of research (see c) above) in some disciplines, and stagnation in others
- e) Each institution should be assessed in the same way, but institutions should be at liberty to opt out of assessment
- f) Individual subjects should have their own modes of assessment, established by a panel of leading experts in that field. If this turns out to throw up clusters of assessment modes, these might be grouped for administrative purposes
- g) The current system which gives institution control over the contents of their submissions seems the only practically viable one
- h) No research assessment process can support equality of treatment for all groups of staff in HE, nor should it. Either there are different levels of attainment in research, and some staff are thereby more entitled to research funding than others, or we may as well all give up right now
- Transparency, rigour and visible fairness are the most important features of an assessment process.