

HEFCE RAE Review: Response on behalf of *Bolton Institute*

22nd November 2002

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the developing debate on the character and structure of future Research Assessment Exercises. Our response is that within the context of a smaller HEI in which about 50% academic staff are undertaking research in its broadest terms. Of these, approximately 60% are undertaking research that would be considered to be of the character and quality suitable for submission to the RAE and they cover about 10 disciplines (defined in terms of RAE 2001 Units of Assessment) from technology, life and social sciences, humanities to business-related interests.

The Institute's Research and Innovation Mission is:

" To support and promote all research activities of its staff that lead to the enrichment of its academic work with a particular focus on those which translate into useful and profitable outcomes".

As a consequence of this statement, we consider that the recent research assessment exercises have been far too narrow and do not enable the research that address the needs of regional and national "user groups" as well as international peer communities to be valued and encouraged. This is especially the case for the former groups in terms of the present lack of recognition by the RAE process of the respective relevance and importance to the economic and well being of these user communities. Furthermore, the present process, while being understood by the academic community, is far less so by the various user groups which are assumed to be the beneficiaries of the assessed research.

We believe that recognition of research quality should come from an assessment appropriate to specific user groups and should accommodate their different needs. Furthermore, HM Government, through HEFCE, should be able to encourage research that is particularly related to the regional and national activities of those HEIs, like Bolton Institute, that assist in adding wealth too, and improving quality of life to these communities. This is especially relevant to newer areas such as small business research, one that the conventional large business research peer group appears to ignore.

Since one outcome of the RAE has been to determine funding related to assessment rating, then we consider that the assessment of research should take into account its usefulness. It is the regional and national communities that fund research through taxation and it is reasonable to expect that they should receive some of its tangible benefits.

1. ***Expert Review:*** This should be an essential part of any future RAE since the judgement of quality of the research being assessed is carried out by peer review. However, the constitution of RAE 1996 and 2001 panels were too academically focussed with little input from and relevance to the wider non-academic and user peer groups. It is imperative, therefore, that peer groups are correctly defined and represented.

The Institute will always aspire to maximise the quality of research undertaken by members of its research teams and so will wish to have this research quality measured against an external benchmark underpinned by expert judgement. This judgement is useful to the Institute in that it highlights strengths and weaknesses of its research performance at individual and team levels as well as across the whole. It

also allows the outside world to see those areas in which we have some very good work going on.

2. **Algorithm based on metrics:** It is considered that the use of metrics is a highly inaccurate instrument that does not accommodate the sensitivities of assessing research quality across the whole academic continuum. For instance, the use of outcome citation frequency is assumed to be useful in the science-based disciplines but it is also dependent on the size and activity within a given research area. Its use is flawed when considering research by smaller numbers of constituents in less populous and less fashionable areas.
3. **Self-assessment:** This has usually been a part of previous RAE assessments and during the recent RAE 2001 process was used by the Institute to assess the quality of research across its own interest areas. Self-assessment thus enabled it to make decisions regarding units of assessment in which submissions would be made and the individuals and respective outcomes to be included within each UoA. If self-assessment were to be the basis of future RAEs with increased in rigour in terms of the internal processes required, then this would cause an unbearable burden for smaller institutions; this is a significant reason for our rejecting this method in addition to the lack of external bench-marking. However, for self-assessment not to be followed by external peer assessment is alien to the accepted research culture.
4. **Historical ratings:** Use of these might be acceptable for the higher-rated departments assuming that in the previous RAE there were no indications of decline in activity or "loss of vitality". However, for institutions in which there were lower scoring UoA submissions, there would be the constant need to be seen to be improving on the one hand and relevant to external communities on the other. Consequently, we believe that the use of historical ratings is unacceptable.
5. **Cross-cutting themes:** We agree that different disciplines require different assessment methodologies, eg science & engineering versus humanities versus "creative" studies; however, all should be judged on **quality of outcome rather than input**. The present RAE is too heavily weighted towards the latter. This is especially important in the non-science and engineering areas where large research grants are rarely, if ever, available from external funders and high quality research in terms of outcome is often achieved for minimal resource input. The humanities and creative disciplines are noteworthy of special mention here.

While the recent RAE measured research quality against external benchmarks of excellence, we consider that institutions having a more vocational and often local relevance may also carry out excellent research. This is most important, given HM Government's and HEFCE's desire to be seen to be more responsive to the needs of the community, at both regional and national levels. Such research outcomes have often yielded RAE ratings of 2 or 3b/3a and yet the underlying academic challenge and outcome value within the context of an institution's mission and regional community may be considered often to be at a higher level than such ratings might indicate. The quality of patents and IPR exploitation success within the regional economy might also fall into this group, as may elements of the "creative" research areas many of which are already covered by defined previous RAE units of assessment - Art & Design, Art History, Media, Drama, Creative Writing, Dance etc. It is therefore important that future assessment must be multi-dimensional and enable quality assessment to be relevant to a variety of different user groups. Perhaps the RAE should be designed to include recognition, under different sections, of two kinds of output; a "twin tracked" approach. The latter, of course, could be considered as being nearer to "3rd core" activities and so raises the question of having a "3rd Core RAE" either separately or as a second strand within the overall RAE process.

However, funding for this as a financial incentive or support for HEIs to engage in this more applied research must be more substantial than that currently available for HEROBAC activity delivery, which normally precludes research.

In conclusion, the most important features of any future research assessment process that we should wish to see present are:

1. It should be based on quality of research outcome and not on input.
2. It should seek to enhance research quality across the whole HEI research base and not influence its direction or focus.
3. The process should be multi-dimensional and address the needs of a variety of external peer communities.
4. Institutions should have considerable control over the submission process and thus reflect their different interests and missions.
5. The whole RAE process and outcomes must be understandable and relevant to the various research user communities.