

Response to Joint Funding Councils Review of the RAE

General Observations

1. We view the RAE and the subsequent funding as inextricably linked; the RAE is not, for example, just to provide another league table!
2. The RAE should inform the distribution of *all* Research funding through block grant for *institutions* to determine priorities. This maintains HEFCE's role as a Funding Council and not a body with a research planning role. We believe that HEFCE Research funding is for basic, publicly funded research infrastructure within the HE sector and that this is consistent with CSR 2002.
3. The RAE has developed over many years and, with some reservations, is now well-understood by academics and believed to be 'fair'. One danger of changing the process radically is that this hard-won acceptance will be lost.
4. Nevertheless there is widespread acceptance that substantial change is now necessary, specifically to address the following issues:
 - The major 5 year perturbation in funding which is a problem both for HEFCE and HEIs
 - Reconciling a seven point RAE scale with a three point funding scale
 - Reduce the "cost" (direct and indirect) to HEFCE and HEIs
 - Reduce the influence of "presentation" by staff selection and "overlapping" UoAs
 - Identify between the core international quality research which should be funded by HEFCE "QR" and emerging activities which should be funded by HEIs (partly through HEFCE "DevR") and Research Councils
 - Remove the variation in "unit of resource" with RAE outcome
 - The need to encourage truly interdisciplinary research
 - The need to demonstrate that research excellence informs educational programmes
 - The need to ensure that the notion of "research excellence" underpins knowledge transfer rather than endorse behaviours in HEIs which undermine efforts to promote knowledge transfer and exploitation.

Issues and recommendations

Frequency and Format of Submissions

5. The RAE and resulting "QR" funding allocation should fund international quality research only. A different method should be developed for funding emerging research activity and this alternative method should be based on research council funding and universities' discretion about investment. This approach will enable universities to develop research excellence in new areas, including interdisciplinary research, and in groups that may not have had the benefit of substantial QR income.
6. The method and rules of assessment should be the same for all institutions participating.

7. In practice, the current RAE procedure assesses individuals rather than departments or research groups, and yet the resulting grade reflects upon whole departments or schools. The university believes that the practice of not declaring staff, often large numbers relatively, is distorting and counter-productive. Whole groups should be assessed. We would favour a method that assesses a publications list of a whole group. The total number of publications would reflect the total number of staff in the group (e.g. Five times the total number of staff), but the number of publications per member in the list could be flexible to some appropriate upper limit. This would help to include categories of staff that might otherwise be discriminated against (e.g. newly qualified PhDs), but also prevent one research superstar with many publications ‘carrying’ a large number of less able staff.
8. Whilst having many beneficial impacts on culture and behaviours within universities, the RAE has adversely driven something of a wedge between research and teaching missions. Within a research-led university we have a responsibility to ensure that there are strong links between the research and education missions, and research excellence should open up new opportunities for undergraduate students and through them to the external community. The RAE should include some element that assesses the way in which the “hard research” of a group impacts upon educational excellence and the student experience.
9. Currently, the ‘pot of money’ available for a UoA is determined in advance in order not to encourage grade inflation within the UoA during the assessment, and the funding for a research group is determined by its position at the point in time of the assessment. This takes no account of the volatility of some parts of the UK’s research activity and, thus, the growth and decline in research subjects between assessments. Some more ‘damped’ process to determine the unit of resource year-on-year would be better.
10. UoA assessments could be staggered over a complete assessment cycle, e.g. one fifth of all UoAs each year over a period of 5 years. This would not reduce the overall administrative burden but it would make it more manageable and would reduce the risk of a large ‘funding hit’ at each assessment. The university recognises that this approach might adversely affect opportunities for interdisciplinarity but believes that groups of UoAs could be chosen so that the potential linkages within each group are maximised and those between groups minimised and, if this is true, then the benefits of a staggered approach are worth pursuing.
11. The “burden” could be significantly reduced and the presentational influence mitigated by reducing the number of UoAs. However if the reduction is excessive, detailed peer review by subject becomes flawed. If peer review by subject is retained, then clear and identifiable disciplines should be assessed, but these could be significantly reduced in number and a possible example follows:

Potential Subject Areas	Current UoA numbers
Clinical Medicine	1,2,3,4
Biological Sciences	5,6,7,8,14
Professions Allied to Medicine	9,10,11,13
Agriculture etc	15,16,17
Physical and Environmental Sciences	18,19, 20,21
Mathematics	22,23,24
Electrical, Electronic and Computer Sciences	25,29
General Engineering	26,27,28,30,31,32

Geography and Environmental planning	33,34,35
Law & Anthropology	36,37
Management, Economics & Accounting	38, 43,44
Social Sciences	39,40,41,42
International languages and studies	45,46,47,48,49,51,52,53,54,55,56,57
English language and literature	50
Archaeology	58
History & History of Art	59,60,64
Library etc	61
Philosophy & Theology	62,63
Art & Design	64
Performing arts & media studies	65,66,67
Education & Sport	68,69

12. If it was felt necessary to reduce the number of UoAs more dramatically then the university believes that an institutional audit approach would be better. We believe, however, that peer review is an important ingredient of the RAE and would, prefer, therefore, that there was not such a drastic reduction in the number of UoAs.
13. The fundamental ‘core’ of the current RAE is perfectly reasonable and the exercise has only become burdensome over time because of the inclusion of more and more supporting and subsidiary elements. An approach that offered a ‘lighter touch’ could be based on this core but, obviously, not if the RAE were to be changed radically at the same time.
14. It should also be recognised that “international quality” research is more stable than emerging research. It could be that a light-touch be introduced for established world class research, with HEFCE requesting a more formal review if, for example, there had been a large turnover of staff.
15. A ‘light touch’ approach could take into account the emerging technologies which are starting to underpin dynamic year-on-year international rankings of research institutions (e.g. that in Electrical and Electronic Engineering) – ultimately, if appropriate metrics and weightings are developed this could replace the current assessment completely.
16. Groups that want to ‘bid up’ their grade would be required to provide a full assessment. It is unlikely, however, that this burden alone would be sufficient to prevent inappropriate bids by aspiring research groups, and an appropriate mechanism would be required to underpin such a two-level assessment strategy.

Research Assessment Metrics

17. There are suggestions that the RAE could be made more “light-weight” through assessment of input metrics (e.g. Research funding, research student numbers, etc) alone. We believe that research excellence has to be measured principally by outputs (e.g. research publications and PhDs graduated) and these should remain a major part of the assessment. A more “light-touch”, output metric dominated RAE might be achieved using methods such as that described in 15 above.
18. The current “output metrics” are heavily interpreted by panels in favour of single subject, pure research excellence, and these have created within HEIs behaviours which are unhelpful to the enterprise / knowledge transfer agenda. Output metrics related to knowledge transfer should definitely be included in the RAE.