

## **Bournemouth University**

### **Review of Research Assessment**

The review document encourages us to challenge any underlying assumptions that we discern. The assumption that we wish to challenge, most strongly, is that there is any need for a fundamental review of the RAE at all. After a great deal of effort by thousands over the last sixteen years or so, we have arrived at a process which is accepted by the majority to deliver transparently a fair assessment of research quality across the sector. We believe that it would be misguided to change more than the few details necessary to obtain a marginal improvement, which is the most that could be expected, however much effort is expended.

Much of the criticism that arose following the outcomes of the last RAE did not result from the RAE itself, but from the government funding settlement and the algorithms developed to distribute that funding. The two should not be confused. Changing the assessment method will not in itself make the distribution of funds more equitable.

Many of the changes proposed would not improve the assessment, but would add new, and possibly more detrimental, distortions in place of those they purport to remove. The selectivity of the system has often been commented upon, and much has been made of the desire not to increase selectivity of funding, without any noticeable effect. Most of the proposed changes would increase rather than decrease the likelihood of selectivity in favour of established interests, and would thus decrease the credibility of the exercise in the eyes of the majority.

Another key issue that the review is seeking to resolve is the administrative burden created by the RAE. Admittedly, the effort of preparing a submission impacts upon us all, but this can only be exacerbated by change. The resources expended by institutions learning new systems, processes and software, not to mention participating in lengthy review processes, are likely to be a great deal higher than would be the case if we had the rare pleasure of being assessed in an identical way twice in succession. We know what resources we need to marshal for a submission, and when and where to deploy them.

The document also identifies risks arising from universities understanding the system. We submit that the risks arising from universities not understanding the system are far greater.

#### **Expert Review**

We do not believe that “expert review” will prove to have less bias and distortion than “peer review”, it will just be different. “Experts” who are not “peers” will not view their task with any less self-interest – all will have some sort of agenda to pursue. Experts with no links to academia at all will be hard to recruit to the exercise and may have a limited understanding of the culture they are assessing. Those with links to academia cannot be much more objective than the academics themselves.

Combining the assessment of teaching and research would broaden the exercise to the point of unmanageability, and increase distortions arising from the different natures of

institutions. Better by far to consider research quality in isolation without confusing the issue further. We are all in the throes of digesting the implications of the recent changes to our interactions with the QAA. To move the goalposts yet again would impose an intolerable burden that would ultimately detract from the quality of teaching and research.

### **Algorithm**

It is hard to conceive of metrics that are capable of robustly providing an assessment of research quality on their own, and are incapable of being influenced by academics determined so to do. An entirely mechanistic system would rapidly be dominated by those able to expend the most resources in learning about, influencing and manipulating that system. Credibility would swiftly be undermined and we would need another review in short order.

Nevertheless, a cautious use of metrics by peer panels may be useful provided that: the metrics used are appropriate to, and accepted by, the whole discipline assessed by the UoA, the process is wholly transparent and criteria are published, and the published criteria are seen to be adhered to. Algorithms are no substitute for peer review.

### **Self-assessment**

There is already a strong element of self-assessment, in the RA5 and RA6 sections of the existing RAE. Panels (the great majority, anyway) already have to test assertions made by institutions and come to a conclusion about the truth of these statements. Increasing the element of self-assessment increases the risk that institutions will indulge in game-playing, and a heavier burden of judgement over the veracity of submissions will fall on peer panels. We do not believe that increasing self-assessment will be helpful.

### **Historical ratings**

Of all the proposed changes, this is most likely to decrease the credibility of the process and increase divisions across the sector. The current high level of acceptance of the RAE 2001 derives from the transparency of the process and thus the perception of a more level playing field than had previously been the case. This would be a regressive step which would lower morale and incentives to develop research in a large part of the sector, and undermine the broad foundations of the research base in the UK. At all costs, the panel should avoid measures which favour some institutions over others, and this is the most glaring instance of this that has been proposed.

### **Cross-cutting themes**

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

As now, to inform the distribution of research funding and to provide drivers and incentives for improving research quality nationally. In individual institutions it can

provide recognition for success and a warning of falling short. It can shatter self-delusion and provide an objective assessment of achievement.

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

As now, once every five years. The assumption has been proposed that the distribution of research strength changes only slowly. This may be true at a macro-level, but any greater time-frame than five years is too long to provide sufficient incentive for improvement in individual departments. To be funded on the basis of data more than five years out of date would be even more demoralising for those seeking to improve, and lead to complacency in those who did well last time.

Bournemouth University is continuing to build and extend a research culture, as reflected in the grade improvement (the largest in the sector, according to one reporter) between 1996 and 2001. Our strategy of continuing to follow this gradient would be hard to sustain if there is substantial change to the process, and its timing in particular.

c. What is excellence in research?

Care must be taken in incorporating the effects of high quality research on other activities in the assessment of research quality itself. We must recognise that quality can sometimes be defined in terms of fitness for purpose, particularly where applied research is concerned. However, the RAE must not seek to usurp the role of the third leg in providing recognition for these activities. The last RAE contained sufficient mechanisms to ensure that these other aspects were recognised. The question is whether panels took sufficient notice. This is something that can be rectified through a more careful oversight of the process, rather than redefinition of the process itself.

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

There is obviously a need to support emerging disciplines (such as nursing) that has recently been recognised by the funding councils. It is hard to see how this could be incorporated into the exercise itself in a mechanistic way. Rather, the funding councils should continue to make judicious interventions to ensure that emerging disciplines of national importance are not disadvantaged by the system. We would support, therefore, a strategic judgement on the importance of the area, but only in areas where there is obviously gross inequality, rather than a routine policy assessment of all UoAs.

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

Undoubtedly. There can be no justification whatsoever for inequality of opportunity.

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

The current approach is about right.

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

The risks identified as being associated with change in either direction are both unacceptable. A well-managed institution will always involve staff in the development of the RAE submission, but must retain the right to manage its own strategic direction. The level of bureaucracy is currently manageable, but we would not like to see it increased.

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

Do not make it more selective. Do not make it more difficult to understand. Maintain a level playing field between institutions. If there is a perception that teaching staff are discriminated against by the RAE, then the solution lies with the funding and assessment of teaching, not with the assessment of research.

### **Conclusion**

The RAE has improved over the last decade, and is now a model that other countries look to as an example of good practice. It has achieved a great deal of transparency and acceptance within the sector. Grumbling about the RAE has become a habit for some people, but after 2001 we believe that the exercise is finally becoming the robust, fair assessment process that it was intended to be. We firmly believe that to make fundamental changes would be a mistake that would have grave ramifications for the sector and the quality of its research in particular.