

Response to the Joint Funding Bodies' Review of
Research Assessment

On behalf of the University of Teesside

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The purpose of the research assessment process should be improvement in the quality of research across the sector as a whole being fair to individuals and institutions, transparent and rigorous in this process. The ultimate goal should be to enhance the quality of life.

A rolling, expert-review system of discipline-based assessment, that considers teaching and third-leg activities in addition to research activities, would be an improvement to the current system. Some form of dialogue with the assessors should be an integral part of the process to enable groups to expand upon their achievements and aspirations.

Comments on the current Research Assessment Exercise

Valid points were made by the UniversitiesUK preliminary contribution to the review regarding the limitations of the current RAE:

- lack of consistent application between panels
- mismatch between Units of Assessment and many university structures
- diminishing returns for efforts
- continuing problems with the assessment of interdisciplinarity
- demoralization of staff, with no recognition of 'team effort'
- disincentive to inter-institutional collaboration
- bureaucratic burden on institutions
- favour a return to the 1996 level of selectivity in funding
- favour inclusion of innovation in the assessment process
- funding allocations should be made known at the start of the process
- need to fully recognise all aspects of excellence in research
- need to fully recognise enterprise activities

The current funding gradient is too steep and undervalues research judged to be of 'national' importance. In addition, the significance of regional agendas is not taken into consideration. There should be a threshold, probably a 3b, when funding support is triggered and then a less steep gradient of funding up to 5*.

Response to the Proposed Approaches to Research Assessment

- Expert Review

There is a real need, especially in applied disciplines, to widen the scope and influence of the experts beyond the academic community to ensure that certain research areas are fairly assessed. Another key way to improve the expert review system would be to strengthen future strategy assessment combined with past performance assessment. In addition, an emphasis on outcome rather than output as the basis for the assessment would enable the experts to assess a more inclusive

review of research activity. Inclusion of third leg activity such as knowledge transfer and information about how research and teaching are inter-linked would further broaden the process, enabling assessment of research activity within its widest context. In our view, discipline-based, assessment at group or department level remains the only feasible option. The sixty-nine Units of Assessment could be expanded to include new disciplines as appropriate.

- Algorithm

It is not acceptable to assess research entirely on the basis of metrics. This mechanism would not allow the assessment of research in its widest context to be taken into account and would inevitably encourage 'game-playing'. However, expansion and strengthening of metrics within the current system is favoured. Performance indicators that record value for money, added value and enhancement of the research culture should be considered. The current process does not adequately allow for part-time research students and excludes the inclusion of full-time academic staff who undertake PhDs.

- Self-assessment

An element of self-assessment is part of the current RAE system and is considered to be a valuable part of the process. However, difficulty in the verification and validation of the information provided presents a barrier to adoption of this system as a major part of the process. The inclusion of some form of dialogue with the expert assessors may be a way forward in this respect.

- Historical ratings

There is some merit in recognising that excellence is only built up over time. However, institutional grading, as suggested, would be misleading due to variation in performance within institutions. Value for money could play an important part in assessing performance.

Crosscutting themes

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

The purpose and use of the research assessment should be clearly defined, in particular in relation to the research councils. A broader based research assessment could potentially provide a useful benchmark for sponsors, institutions and the wider community.

b. How often should research be assessed?

A rolling programme of discipline-based assessment would facilitate a wider, interactive assessment process.

c. What is excellence in research?

Excellence in the quality of research is linked to rigor, value and benefit.

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

Assessment and funding should be independent of each other. Allocation of 'subject pots' should be directed by reputation and track record influenced by widening the criteria and scope of the assessment process to give greater recognition to more applied research and knowledge transfer activity.

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

Institutions should be assessed in the same way. The suggestion of a 'ladder of improvement' to enable newer groups to improve is welcomed. Standards should remain high across the board but the system must remain dynamic by encouraging the development of new research groups.

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

Further standardisation in the assessment process would not allow the different traditions and approaches to quality between disciplines to be reflected.

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

Institutional-level assessment or grading is not acceptable but it is imperative that institutions can manage the assessment process to facilitate meaningful forward planning.

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

Discrimination remains a problem in the assessment of research activity despite the attempts to include 'special circumstances' etc within the current process. However, we would suggest that this issue cannot be resolved through the review of research but is more fundamental and should continue to be addressed at national and institutional level.

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

Please refer to opening statement.