

RESPONSE from the Joint University Council for Public Administration, Social Policy and Social Work Education to the CONSULTATION by the Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment

A. PREAMBLE

The Joint University Council (JUC) is a federal body that was founded in 1918 and which exists to promote the interests of the universities in the fields of Public Administration, Social Policy and Social Work Education. The JUC now represents the vast majority of British higher education institutions teaching and researching in these fields through its three subject-based standing committees. One of the significant strengths of JUC is that it possesses considerable expertise in the application of research to practice. The JUC functions principally by:

- developing close relations with government departments, professional institutes and other policy-making bodies;
- providing a national forum for discussing matters of mutual concern;
- funding and underwriting activities, such as collaborative research, workshops, seminars and conferences;
- disseminating information to member institutions and their staff;
- promoting awareness of the applied social sciences amongst schools, careers services and employers;
- fostering contacts with international academic, professional and inter-governmental organisations.

In forming its response to the Joint Funding Bodies' Review the JUC has consulted widely with its members and has formulated its contribution following a lively and well-attended conference, "The Future and Implementation of Selectivity in the Funding of Research", held in London on the 18th September 2002.

B. COMMENTARY

The social sciences contribute fundamentally to society. They provide training at a variety of levels and the social science PhD is an immensely transferable qualification that feeds the R&D capability of much of the private and most of the public sector. They provide the theoretical underpinning to professional qualifying programmes such as social work, probation, medical and non-medical training and teacher training. They contribute to our understanding of local, regional and national communities and to their associated planning mechanisms. Their research capacity and variety is amply demonstrated in, though not universally valued by, the RAE.

Selectivity, by its nature, has exclusionary consequences. Certain kinds of academic work and the people who do it are left out of account, either because they are not valued within the RAE process, or because they are not even submitted for consideration for the purposes of the RAE. Consultancy work, small-scale local projects, project or practice evaluations usually give rise to 'in-house' reports, to practice guides or to innovative outputs (such as videos) that may be of high quality and considerable social scientific value, but they either do not count for RAE purposes, or else their status within the RAE process is so ambiguous and uncertain that HEIs will not submit them.

There are impressive examples of HEIs that have developed strong links with their local communities and who have successfully drawn members of academic staff into methodologically rigorous and effective research activities on behalf of local organisations. However, because of the 'sub-national' status of such work there is little or no incentive to submit it for the RAE. The effect of this is both discouraging and damaging. In a climate that appears primarily to reward those research outputs that are published in internationally recognised academic journals, there are tranches of competent and potentially important research that are in danger of being entirely neglected. Additionally, in some HEIs, it would seem that a corrosive divide is emerging between a majority of academic staff that are no longer expected to be research active and an elite minority that are encouraged and assisted to publish.

A more holistic approach to the assessment of research activity is required; and ways should be found to enable researchers engaged in sub-national and practice related research to draw out the general and analytical implications that flow from their work and present it in a wider forum. Sub-national activity can, in any event, be of national and international significance.

C. KEY ISSUES

In responding to the three key areas identified by the Joint Funding Bodies Review, we pose the question "Does excellence in research assessment terms relate to:

1. esoteric notions of scientific or scholarly merit?
2. utility or policy relevance?
3. innovative value or critical meaning?"

It is clear that the funding councils favour approach (1), which is premised largely on a natural science model that is not necessarily appropriate to the social sciences in general, or to the applied social sciences in particular. Approach (2), although ostensibly acknowledged by some of the panels in recent RAEs, has been pushed to the margins by the importance attached by the RAE to an ill-defined distinction between national and international excellence. Approach (3), through which new thinking and normative challenges to policy and practice may emerge, can also be marginalised by a process that places the highest value on empirically based research.

Any credible measure of quality in relation to research or critical scholarship in the applied social sciences must include some assessment of the *influence* that such work might potentially have upon social or public policy, upon professional and administrative practices, and / or upon our understanding of the significance of policy and practice in people's lives.

The majority of women and academics from minority groups were concentrated in the post 1992 universities. Many of these academics were on part time contracts or were without tenure. The structural indicators in this area are clear and there is a question as to the extent that the RAE in its present form reinforced these trends.

C.1. WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITY SHOULD BE ASSESSED?

In addition to the more orthodox types of activity:

1. Any new system must remedy the current, if unintentional, discrimination against interdisciplinary and policy orientated works.
2. Research outputs that were less highly valued in the RAE tended to take the form of papers written for a practitioner audience and did not set out their research credentials as clearly as research articles in academic journals. However, they could be a valuable addition to the body of knowledge, and some papers were outstanding and ways should be found to give these due recognition.
3. Whilst the involvement of service users was given a high priority by some Government departments in research and the provision of services, this priority was not necessarily carried over into the processes or working of the RAE.
4. Although the funding councils acknowledge the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinarity there is a belief that there clearly were disincentives to full collaboration between high and lower research rated institutions and that the potential scope for interdisciplinary working has been inhibited. Of particular significance is the scope for research relating to interprofessional practices in, for example, the fields of health and social care.
5. The Public Administration, Social Policy and Social Work traditions, while strictly non-partisan, have all made important contributions to debates concerning established policies and practices and there is a possibility, at least, that the implicitly empiricist priorities that now seem to dominate research funding may weaken the ability of applied social researchers to offer interpretive and critical input.

C.2. WHAT IS EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AND HOW CAN IT BE ASSESSED?

Excellence should be reflected in the process of research as much as in its content. A new system should promote the building of longer-term capacity. Young research academics require to be developed and it is in the long-term interests of the disciplines to nurture today's research apprentices to enable them to become research active in due course. Since some of the middle rankings dominate in applied fields, especially those with a strong practitioner base, successful capacity building initiatives should be recognised. Similarly there must be sufficient funding available to sustain and promote research in the short and longer term to enable excellence to be attained and sustained. Underfunding damages both those who performed well, as well as those who performed less well.

1. In terms of judging quality, good theory may not always lead to good practice. Peer review is essential and, apart from the matter of how we define peers, the applied nature of JUC's subjects requires the integration and valuing of user perspectives, a process that is in its relative infancy in most areas: and there can be difficulties in reconciling the attendant discomforts. However there is much more to be done to establish participation with a broader stakeholder base, especially in respect of service users. The outcome judgements of the RAE indicate that collaborative research is not valued as highly as other forms of research and this must be remedied if linkage is to be improved. Research relevant to service users must be inclusive if it is to be acknowledged as excellent. As a result of their previous experience, public service users had identified a number of clear, essential indicators for the future:
 - a. earlier service user involvement and consultation;
 - b. service user involvement in the process and membership of the UoA panel;
 - c. recognition of research undertaken by service users and their organisations;
 - d. clear criteria established for service user involvement in research;
 - e. a valuing of research which made a difference to service users' quality of life;
 - f. wider dissemination of results (not simply to an academic audience);
 - g. earlier and more effective involvement by service users in any future RAE;

and these indicators should inform any criteria that are adopted to define excellence.

2. Mechanisms, either for research submission or research assessment, should actively be required to demonstrate their inclusion of minority groups in order to ensure opportunities to influence cultural norms and to reflect social and cultural diversity and the widening participation agendas. Not to do so would put research excellence outside of the mainstream parameters. Perhaps in the first instance some form of monitoring might be included. When the Treasury and Government set research policy, it should reflect the complexities of people's lives and question the assumptions made of what constituted 'quality' theory and method.
3. The RAE supports the effort that is involved in research and the value that is attached to it. High quality policy and practice oriented research can entail a great deal of time-consuming fieldwork in order to generate effective evaluative data, but because primary research of this nature may not immediately give rise to peer-reviewed articles there is an incentive for academics to undertake desk-based research, using secondary data, in order to generate high status outputs. The efforts of academics who engage with local user groups, for example, and persuade them of the benefits of methodologically rigorous research that will address their needs, should be rewarded.

C.3. WHAT IS THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST?

A wide range of factors influences accountability and trust and the particular system of selectivity is rather less important than its capacity to engender confidence in its outcomes: there is unlikely to be a universally ideal size of unit of assessment; both peer review and self-assessment can be viewed as partisan. In addressing this issue the JUC advocates the use of a consultative process, involving representation from the relevant learned societies and professional bodies, to identify appropriate mechanisms.

The JUC supports:

1. Mechanisms that would enable the diversity of activity to be recognised: perhaps by the funding of smaller, more broadly dispersed pockets of excellence, the introduction of more flexible units of assessment or the development of capacity and the levelling out of historical / structural funding divisions.
2. The linking of research and teaching excellence. The present drive for increased selectivity damages rather than strengthens this important linkage. Some departments now see their primary function as research rather than teaching.
3. The next system must be demonstrably fair. Although UoAs were very conscientious and attempted to make objective judgments, there was considerable anecdotal evidence of different indicators being used by different panels. There were some particular concerns about panels, which may have behaved unduly harshly in an attempt to establish "standards". The outcomes have penalised the future research potential of those subject areas.
4. In the last RAE the criteria were not always clear, nor were the ways in which the criteria were interpreted. This needs to be addressed. For instance, the issue of establishing 'national' or 'international' reputation was a major difficulty.
5. The funding councils and the RAE panels should adopt a definition of 'quality' in relation to research that is both more broad and more clear than that implied by the current notions of national and international excellence. Additionally, it is vital that guidance on this definition offered to HEIs should

be credible: researchers should be able to feel confident that the work they submit will be considered in terms of its substantive merit, rather than its formal standing.

In summary, the next system must be transparent, equitable and fair. It must reward applied research and those institutions that link teaching to research, and it must acknowledge the widening participation agenda in all its forms.