

Funding Councils' Review of Research Assessment
Response from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB)
28 November 2002

The Arts and Humanities Research Board welcomes this opportunity to comment on the principles and approaches that should underpin any future research assessment in the United Kingdom. This response expands upon the key principles set out in the submission made on behalf of the Research Councils Strategy Group (RCUK).

1. The Research Landscape

The position and scope of arts and humanities in the higher education sector are illustrated by data from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The arts and humanities are covered by 24 Units of Assessment (UoAs) which account for around 12,200 research active staff, or 25% of all those entered in the 2001 RAE. Of these, around 10,300 were category A fundable staff obtaining QR from the four territories of the UK, again representing some 25% of all fundable category A staff.

In 2001 there were around 62,000 postgraduates and 284,000 undergraduates in arts and humanities subjects. Arts and humanities students represented some 22% of the total full-time student population. Of the overall total, 48,000 were EU or overseas students who recognise the quality of the UK research base through their decision to undertake their research training and study here in the UK. The wider importance of arts and humanities to the UK economy, society and civil life was acknowledged in the recent report from the Treasury-led Cross-Cutting Review of Science and Research.

Despite the pervasive nature of arts and humanities, this review comes at a critical period for public funding of arts and humanities research in the UK, and the Board would wish to impress upon the Funding Councils the strategic importance for the arts and humanities of the RAE and of the QR funding that flows from it. QR funding for arts and humanities amounts to some £195 million in 2002-03, representing some 18.5% of total QR. Although that sum is less than would be merited if QR were to be distributed equally across all subject areas, it is almost seven times larger than the £28 million provided for project research through the AHRB. These relative contributions for arts and humanities research from the two sides of the dual support system are very different from those of the subjects and disciplines represented by the other Research Councils (with the exception of ESRC), where QR is just under two-thirds of that available to HEIs through Research Council funding.

Thus, for research intensive universities QR not only allows institutions to employ more research active staff than teaching income alone would permit, it is also fundamental to the health and vibrancy of the arts and humanities subject domain.

The Board would also wish to stress support for the principles and concepts that underpin the dual support system. The Funding Councils (via QR) and the Research Councils (via project funding) have different roles and responsibilities and, whilst the Board recognises the need for complementarity between those respective roles in order to ensure a vibrant research environment, it would be inappropriate to seek convergence of agendas and priorities. The dual support system rests on funding on the basis of outputs (=QR) and funding on the basis of promises (=RC grants). Of course there is overlap, and research assessments should include assessment of strategic research plans as they are the transition from past to future, in the same way that RC grants take account of past achievement when deciding on validity of promises. However, QR and RC grants rightly sit at different points on the retrospective/prospective continuum.

2. Objectives of the Review for future Research Assessment

It is important that the objectives for the Research Assessment Exercise are clear and transparent. Previous research assessments aimed to improve the management and outputs of research, and thereby to enhance the international standing of the UK research base. There has been considerable success in achieving both aims, resulting both in selectivity and in the development of a critical mass of high-quality institutions. Any future assessment model(s) should seek to maintain this critical mass in terms of numbers, range and diversity of well-funded research institutions as the basis for a healthy and competitive research environment. Nevertheless, the Board recognises that a further rise in the proportion of 5* and 5-rated departments may not be sustainable. There is a need to provide greater differentiation in the grading scale, particularly at the top end of the range. This could be achieved through a nine or ten point scale with the current 5 and 5* ratings stretched into four new grades at the top of this new scale.

The Board is clear that future RAEs should continue to be focussed on assessing research quality. Judgements as to impact and relevance are important in reaching judgements as to quality, but it is important not to assume that they are one and the same thing. Impact and relevance may be dependent on quality, but high impact does not guarantee quality. Thus while “research” must be defined broadly, systems of assessment must differentiate and define “quality” (intrinsic quality of research reached from the judgement of peers and experts) and “impact & relevance” (which in the arts and humanities is generally more difficult to measure at the individual researcher level and is as much a function of demand as supply).

3. Nature of Arts and Humanities Research

Arts and humanities research has historically rested on individual researchers. The arrival of the AHRB has permitted the rapid growth of project-based collaborative research that needs funding of the kind provided by the Research Councils. Arts and humanities research will, nonetheless, continue to rest on individual researchers to a far greater extent than other disciplines, and this means that any assessment of quality using research council income as a surrogate measure would seriously distort the outcomes.

Humanities outputs are diverse: a mixture of monographs and publication in a wide range of specialist journals which do not have clear hierarchies of standing of the kind which exist in some subjects in the sciences and economics. Arts outputs include not only these but also forms of creative output (including performance) which do not necessarily produce any text-based publication. These characteristics mean that plausible metrics-based systems of assessment for arts and humanities research would be impossible to construct.

4. Key Points and Principles

For all these reasons, and accepting that there are elements of the current research assessment process and funding formulae which require radical reform, the Board believes that the approach for research assessment should be to reform the current system, with expert review complemented by self-assessment. There is a set of principles which the AHRB regards as fundamental to its view of revision to the system of research assessment.

(i) Support for Expert Review

Expert judgements are the only appropriate way to arrive at assessments of quality in the arts and humanities, with judgements driven by qualitative rather than purely quantitative indicators. Hence, the AHRB supports the continuance of an assessment regime based primarily on peer and expert review.

There might be a limited role for self-assessment to complement the expert review process. This would only be feasible if there is a move to a greater degree of collective assessment. Any use of self-assessment would need to be clearly defined and constrained, stringent guidance would be required on its operation, and its main role would be to assist panels in targeting their review efforts. In assessing the feasibility of self-assessment, its use would have to be judged against two key criteria; the extent to which it reduces the burdens of research assessment on all parties, and the need to maintain the credibility of the review process with the academic community and beyond.

The AHRB recognises that assessing a wider range of indicators beyond individual research outcomes requires reviewers with a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience. Whilst academic judgements should continue to be made by fellow peers, there could be wider use of users and practitioners as advisers and observers of the process. They could report to an audit body and provide some independent verification on the rigour and probity of the review process. The Funding Councils may wish to consider the feasibility of a two-stage peer review process, with greater use of self-assessment in the early stages in order to reduce the scale of reviewing by panel members of individual pieces of output.

(ii) Fundamental problems with metric-based algorithms for quality assessment

Metrics cannot be the basis of a quality assessment that is to carry any credibility in the arts and humanities. Indeed, as was made clear in consultations prior to the 2001 RAE, metrics are only of any value to a small number of experimental science disciplines. The shortcomings of the algorithmic model as applied to the arts and humanities were explored in paragraph 3 above. There are fundamental problems with using bibliometrics and external grant income as surrogates for quality; the former because the range of outlets and outcomes is more diverse and the quality of different outlets is not as hierarchically arranged; the latter because external income funds only one mode of research with high-quality research carried out on projects which need no such income. Additionally, the low volumes of research grant income in arts and humanities would unfairly skew distribution.

(iii) Individual or Collective Assessment

Since individual research is so important in the arts and humanities, there is a need to retain assessment of individual outputs. But it is also important to make it much easier for collective outcomes to be assessed, particularly with regard to collaborations between teams, departments, institutions and disciplines. Collective assessments could be focussed on groups of academics dispersed across a number of departments, thus facilitating interdisciplinary working and strategic partnerships. Collective assessments should be defined not only through aggregated outputs but also through testable statements about infrastructure, support and modes of research, and collective impacts as defined by the individual panels and departments.

(iv) Reform and Reduction in number of Units of Assessment

The existing number of Units of Assessment (UoAs) is unsustainable. In the arts and humanities the Board believes that it is possible to operate with no more than eight to ten panels, as the Board itself has done in the first four years of its existence. Broader UoA categories would encourage and support multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary working. A smaller number of UoAs, allied to stronger generic assessment criteria,

should improve the consistency of assessments in subjects of similar type, such as in the Performing Arts and Modern Languages.

(v) Assessment Criteria

Research assessment should focus as a first priority on research quality. Whilst the Funding Councils should establish a definition of research and a generic framework for assessment, it is also important that panels have the flexibility to agree specific assessment criteria that are the most appropriate for their subject domain. Strengthening the definition of assessment criteria would also increase the feasibility of greater self-assessment. For instance, for individual assessments, there is a legitimate role for re-interpretative syntheses within quality research.

In the creative and performing arts, the submission of visual media, products, electronic output, musical composition and recordings of performance all offer in their own right scope for individual or, in some cases, collective assessments of research quality. In any new system it is important that approaches taken to the eligibility of practice-based outputs are perceived to be comparable across art forms. At the same time, there needs to be agreement as to whether or not textual commentary is required as a means of highlighting the research elements of a practice-based submission. The research assessment system must define practice-based research in terms that command confidence in the disciplines concerned, and must also ensure that it is appropriately assessed. The AHRB has already offered to facilitate discussions with the research community on behalf of HEFCE, in order to clarify these issues.

In terms of collective assessment, any new system should, reward high-quality innovative and interdisciplinary research across departments or institutions, and encourage collaborations and partnerships between institutions as opposed to competition. A strong research strategy to exploit the known strengths and opportunities could also be a key assessment criterion.

(vi) Implementation Issues

The Board agrees that there is a need to reduce the bureaucratic burdens and financial costs of the RAE process for HEIs, panel members and Funding Council staff. However, care must be taken to ensure that reductions in bureaucratic and cost burdens are not at the expense of credibility and trust in the system.

There is also a need to minimise the tendency towards games playing. Institutions will play to the rules in accordance with their best advantage. But any new system should discourage HEIs from adopting inappropriate tactics or strategies where these are ultimately self-defeating. 100% return of staff is not possible, but for transparency, institutions could be required to list all staff in a particular department or unit even if some staff are not formally returned for research assessment purposes. An HEI should be allowed to return those it defines as research-active to allow those who are in predominantly teaching driven institutions to be rewarded. However, we believe that there must be clear criteria and guidance as to what constitutes a credible critical mass necessary to achieve the highest quality ratings in an individual unit of assessment. We should aim to ensure that in a system of collective assessments, 100% of those staff with a contractual obligation to pursue research should be returned.

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