

160 **Review of Research Assessment (HE/RPAC/02/24)**

- 160.1 The Committee was informed of details about the joint Funding Councils' review of research assessment and invited to consider some of the main issues surrounding the future of research quality evaluation in the UK, including any issues or factors relevant to Scotland that ought to be taken into account in the review. It was informed that there were a number of routes by which its advice could be fed into the lead body undertaking the review, the Steering Group, chaired by Sir Gareth Roberts.
- 160.2 Prior to considering the questions in the current consultation document on the research review issued by the Funding Councils, the Committee identified a number of fundamental issues which it considered important for the review to consider.
- 160.3 A fundamental issue for the review should firstly be to review the purposes of research in higher education institutions, to determine whether these purposes are well served by the RAE and to adjust the process where it is not. The Council's view of the purpose of research set out in its research review should be forwarded to the Group.
- 160.4 While research should be assessed distinct from the other activities of higher education institutions, it should not be considered in isolation from these. The assessment should reflect holistically on the role of research within the wider strategic context of the teaching, knowledge transfer and other activities alongside which it takes place.
- 160.5 The Committee **agreed** that there would have to be robust methods of assessing the quality of all research, including applied research, but that there should be a single standard of quality applying across all research and all disciplines. The Committee believed that it would not be appropriate, however, to include economic development criteria in the RAE. These could seriously distort the function of the RAE to the detriment of creative research. They should be dealt with through other mechanisms.
- 160.6 The Committee learned that the Council had considered the various purposes of research. It **advised that the Council** should, for each of these purposes, invite the Steering Group to consider which should be addressed in the review of research assessment, and how they should be addressed. It also **advised that the Council** invite the Steering Group to analyse the impact on different models on each of the roles of research.
- 160.7 The Committee then turned to some of the questions in the current consultation.
- 160.8 **Is quality simply another term for intellectual excellence, or does it have other dimensions reflecting its impact within and beyond the research community?**

It noted that the Council's discussion of research referred to earlier would have relevance to a response to this question.

160.9 **Are there different aspects of research activity – such as creativity and applicability – that each demand recognition?**

There were some points that the Committee **advised** should be taken into communicated to the Steering Group in response to this question:

- The impacts of research and ideas on society, and the importance of such impacts to an assessment of research quality, varies from discipline to discipline. There are impacts on diverse aspects of society, with some on clearly defined areas such as health or the economy. Other ideas have huge but more pervasive impacts on society.
- Some disciplines have not traditionally had a strong research culture and arguably do not need one. For these, the recognition of research through the RAE has had a distorting effect on practice within the discipline. There are other disciplines without a strong traditional research culture but which urgently need to develop one, such as nursing. The retrospective approach of the RAE militates against the development of research in such areas. The notion of the applicability of research is often agreed to be important, but not yet fully understood. In such cases, it may be appropriate to find ways of measuring research quality that are different from other research disciplines, which retaining an absolute, cross-disciplinary concept of quality which provides the necessary 'read-across' for funding purposes.
- The Committee reinforced its view that the funding of research should not be such a powerful driver of university activity that other activities, such as teaching, should suffer. The method of research assessment should not allow institutions to hide or overlook the connections between research and other activities in its academic planning units, and should discourage research from being an activity responsible for broader academic dysfunction. Funding Councils, in their role as funders rather than as assessors of research, might consider capturing the links and interactions between research and other academic activities, including knowledge transfer.

160.10 The Committee noted a view that the RAE seems to be an obstacle to applied social research activities and their future development and utilisation for policy. The reasons for concern were:

- the RAE requirement for publications in recognised (mostly disciplinary) journals compounds the tendency for departments and their research interests to have a disciplinary rather than issue/problem focus.

- the review by peers occurs very much within disciplinary silos and does not encourage researchers to work in inter-disciplinary teams at the edges of their discipline, e.g. there are few social scientists working at the interface between natural and social science although recent developments, e.g. in biological sciences, could benefit from an input from social scientists.
- research publications arising from Government-funded policy research projects (applied research) are not given significant weight in RAE assessment and are therefore not as attractive to academic researchers as ones from RAE 'valued' sources.

160.11 **Should the assessments be prospective, retrospective or a combination of the two?**

The Committee **agreed** that this was an important question which raised a real issue. It noted that there was currently a prospective element in the RAE, with submissions providing forward plans and assessment panels comparing previous forward plans against progress. It noted that the retrospective element of assessment counted against those without a track record in research. However, the Council's Strategic Research Development Grant is able to fund the realisation of potential, which can then seek support through the RAE. Otherwise, the Committee was not persuaded that promissory notes should figure as a basis for RAE funding. There are many areas of applied research that do not depend upon excellence in basic research, and for such areas a focus on knowledge transfer through the Council's Knowledge Transfer Grant might be more appropriate.

160.12 **At what level should assessments be made – individuals, groups, departments, research institutes, or higher education institutions?**

The Committee **agreed** that this was a vital question for the review. It noted that, in the 2001 RAE, most panels assessed *individuals* in coming to decisions on rating submissions. Assessment at the level of individuals rather than Units of Assessment should be seriously considered. It would have two great advantages:

- a) In many areas of research, particularly those that are advancing rapidly, the agenda has moved towards a focus on issues that are not contained within disciplinary bounds. The Unit of Assessment is a serious constraint on a university's capacity to re-configure its effort to address such issues.
- b) Applying a grade to Units of Assessment as a basis for funding introduces a step function in funding that encourages universities to take major risks in configuring their efforts that is akin to a highly unstable game of chance, where small differences of perceived quality can produce very large differences of outcome. Assessments at the level of

individuals, and funding according to cumulative individual quality would remove this step function and its consequences.

At the same time, the Committee was of the view that assessment needed to take into account the strategic plans of the submitting organisational unit, and to accommodate greater flexibility in what units could be submitted by higher education institutions. It therefore **advised that the Council** should note the tension in some areas between the structure of units of assessment and the natural structure for research planning and organisation within higher education institutions

160.13 **Is it, in principle, acceptable to assess research entirely based on metrics?**

What metrics are available?

Can the available metrics be combined to provide an accurate picture of the location of research strength?

If funding were tied to the available metrics, what effects would this have upon behaviour? Would the metrics themselves continue to be reliable?

What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

160.13.1 It was **agreed** that the use of metrics would work better in some areas, such as science and engineering, than in others, such as the arts and social sciences. Furthermore, performance against some metrics in certain disciplines are often reflections of the policies of the major grant awarding bodies in those disciplines, and these policies may not always be working effectively. Particular sets of metrics are therefore often useful only within single or cognate disciplines.

160.13.2 Specifically, the Committee suggested that the correlation between the 2001 RAE ratings on the one hand, and research grants, or research students or other possible general indicators should be examined. It **advised the Council** that it should invite the review to plot these relationships, and that algorithms were one important input to the work of an assessment panel, but were not generally useful in isolation.

160.14 **Self-assessment**

The review consultation asks whether the Funding Councils should use a self-assessment model in which institutions, departments or individuals assess themselves. The Committee did not see a useful role for self-assessment in the research assessment process.

160.15 **Historical ratings**

160.15.1 The review consultation asks whether the Funding Councils should, as part of an assessment process, give each institution a rating based on its historical performance and/or the value of its research infrastructure. Research would, in effect, be presumed to be strongest in those departments or institutions with the strongest track record.

160.15.2 The Committee considered this to raise similar issues to those discussed when it considered the 'applicability' of research and new and emerging disciplines, and to raise questions primarily concerning funding issues, rather than assessment issues. New research disciplines that do not emerge from older and well-funded disciplines, for example nursing, are likely to be discouraged and seriously disadvantaged by a historical rating, unless supported by strategic funding instead of quality related funding. If such research is lifted by strategic funding and is to be sustained through quality funding, the Funding Councils may need to adjust their funding algorithms, for example to provide more funding for 3-rated departments in these disciplines than in other disciplines.

160.16 **What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?**

The Committee **advised that the Council**, in its input to the review, should be mindful of the degree of funding discretion that would be allowed to it by proposed models of research assessment. It also **advised that the Council** should ask that the Steering Group discusses the relative latitude and utility of models to the Funding Councils to implement whatever patterns of funding might fit their future strategic aims.

160.17 **How often should research be assessed?**

The Committee **advised that the Council** should ask the Steering Group to consider the balance between the short term strategic planning and short term research projects to which a frequent assessment would give rise, on the one hand, and the need of the Funding Councils for reasonably up-to-date data so that funding accurately reflected research performance.

160.18 **Should each institution be assessed in the same way?**

The Committee **agreed** that Scottish institutions should continue to be assessed on a UK-wide basis, and **advised the Council** to recommend this to the review.

160.19 **Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?**

The Committee **agreed** with this suggestion, although methods of assessment should vary in detail from discipline to discipline to fit best their styles of research. It **advised the Council** to recommend this to the review.

160.20 **How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their submissions?**

While there was some dissatisfaction with the possible reputational abuse of ratings such as 5*F, subject to its previous comments on the holistic assessment of academic units the Committee considered the approach in the 2001 RAE to be about right.