

Review of Research Assessment

INTRODUCTION

1. This document, in response to HEFCE's invitation to contribute to the joint funding bodies' review of research assessment, has been prepared by a working party of the British Academy, and has been endorsed by the Academy's Council which has approved its submission in the name of the British Academy.
2. The British Academy is the national academy for the humanities and social sciences. As an independent voice for both the humanities and social sciences, the Academy is in a particularly good position to comment on how changes in the conduct of the Research Assessment Exercise may influence the intellectual health of the nation. Researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences represent 51 per cent of the research-active staff entered in the 2001 RAE. The British Academy is pleased therefore to comment on some of the issues being explored in the Funding Bodies' review of research assessment, and it welcomes their openness in the approach to the present consultation.
3. The British Academy acknowledges that the research assessment exercises have been successful in raising the quality of UK research, but we are concerned that it has now reached the point of diminishing returns. The administrative loads and rigidities associated with the current system have made it very time-consuming for higher education institutions. The Academy believes that there should be a simpler and cheaper system to support QR allocations from the Funding Councils.
4. The British Academy's overriding aim is that research assessment should be rigorous, fair and transparent, and should properly reflect the special interests and nature of research in the humanities and social sciences. It has been concerned that former assessment exercises have been too geared towards research in the natural sciences, where the needs can be very different from those of the humanities and social sciences. Any changes to the assessment of research should, therefore, reflect the way in which research is conducted by all the disciplines. The Academy is also worried that the RAE has discouraged long-term speculative research.
5. In many areas of the humanities and social sciences, in-depth scholarly study is a normal and even prime form of research. This has not always been recognised by the RAE. Before the 2001 RAE, 'scholarship' was referred to as a form of activity separate from, and in some way inferior to research. The Academy was pleased therefore that the value of scholarship was recognised in the 2001 RAE, where it was defined as "the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases." The British Academy urges that future research assessments should continue to give due recognition to this type of activity.
6. The British Academy believes that the system of dual support for research is of fundamental importance, particularly in the humanities where some of the best research is still produced by individual researchers working on long-term infrastructural projects. The funding provided by the Funding Councils through the QR formula is critical in supporting the basic infrastructure of research in the humanities and social sciences, in the form of staff costs and libraries. Given the importance of QR funds, we are concerned that the level of funding has risen only fractionally above inflation in recent years. Indeed, the level of QR funding is clearly too low for all subjects. One consequence of this has been severe under-investment in the infrastructure for research. A report commissioned by HEFCE, UUK and SCOP found that the problems were extreme in the arts and humanities, and it said that £500 million of remedial investment was needed for buildings, libraries, equipment and information technology. In addition, the funding arrangements for the sector appear to be unstable, and are subject to too many policy shifts and changes in direction. It is a concern that so many university departments invested considerable time and effort to improve their RAE ratings, but the majority of them saw little benefit and some even experienced cuts in their funding despite

maintaining their performance. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for our universities to develop and advance high quality research to world class level. It is essential that the funds to support research be increased substantially, in order to ensure that research of international renown is not lost.

7. It is also important that there should be incentives to improve future research performance, and that departments' efforts to improve the supply and development of researchers be recognised. The British Academy believes that there should be a clear reward in grades and resulting financing for fostering a research culture, as shown by, say, successful post-doctoral placing of recent PhDs. It also believes that the Working Group should consider ways in which the research assessment exercises can encourage long-term speculative projects, whose research has not yet reached fruition.
8. The discussion document issued by the funding bodies asked whether targeted help is required to enable new subjects or fields to develop. The British Academy believes that the funding councils should not only provide targeted help to new subjects, but should as well provide equal support for certain more established subjects that are also at risk. In the British Academy's *Review of Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, which was completed last year, strong concerns were expressed about the future health of specific subject areas where there were extreme difficulties of recruitment, or where expertise that was central to that subject was in danger of being lost. But the Review found that it was not easy at present to identify these subjects with precision, especially since national data on staff and research student numbers are collected in broad subject categories. The Academy recognises that disciplines evolve and sometimes for good reasons move on from areas where they once had heavy concentrations of staff and students. It would not be desirable therefore to pour resources into these areas at the expense of, say, 'emerging' areas or areas that are at these subjects' core. In view of these concerns, the British Academy agrees that it is appropriate that the research assessment process should help to identify the subject areas that are in need of targeted assistance from the Funding Councils. In addition, the British Academy supports any moves to ensure that future research assessment exercises are sufficiently flexible to allow new areas of excellence to develop, possibly becoming new units or sub-units of assessment.

RESPONSES TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

Approaches to assessment

9. The discussion document envisaged four distinct approaches to assessment (peer review; self assessment; quantitative measures; and historical ratings), and the Academy would like to comment on each of them in turn.
10. Self-assessment The British Academy believes that the arguments against the introduction of self-assessment are compelling. It is concerned that the introduction of self-assessment might encourage institutions to exaggerate their achievements, and reward those that are more adept at playing the system. It also would be difficult for many departments to compare themselves with others, and the self-assessments might therefore provide unhelpful information. The validation of the self-assessments would not be straightforward, and we fear that in practice it would not be less burdensome than expert review.
11. Historical ratings The use of historical ratings is also highly contentious. The British Academy fears that it could lead to ossification and result in the 'haves' resting on their laurels and the 'have-nots' giving up hope.
12. Algorithms The British Academy does not believe that algorithms could be a reasonable substitute for the present system of allocating QR funding to the humanities and social sciences. Many of the quantitative indicators that are available at present are inappropriate for the humanities and social sciences, and do not reflect the nature of research in these disciplines. Unlike the natural sciences, the size of research grant income is not necessarily a measure of research quality in the humanities and social sciences, where the quality of research is less directly dependent upon factors such as

expensive equipment. Also, in the humanities and social sciences, a much higher proportion of external funding comes from the public sector. Any system of research assessment based on external funding would serve only to endorse the decisions of the research councils, who supply the majority of the external funding in these disciplines, making a nonsense of the dual support system. Bibliometric methods are not an appropriate measure of quality in the humanities and social sciences, where the impact and usefulness of works of scholarship or research is best measured over long time-scales and often relate to highly specialist subfields. There would also be a number of practical difficulties, since many of the UoAs in the humanities and social sciences are among the smallest in the RAE, so statistical data is clearly less significant when applied to such small entries. The British Academy also fears that quantitative measures might stimulate undesirable strategies by researchers and institutions to get high grades.

13. Expert review For these reasons, the British Academy believes that peer review should remain the cornerstone of research assessment. It believes that expert review is essential, in order to maintain the confidence of the academic community in the validity of the research assessment process.

The selection of panel members

14. The selection and composition of the panels is crucial to the success of the research evaluation exercise. Panels must have the professional competence to judge research quality, and high standing to be deemed credible. They must obviously be independent. No-one should serve twice as a panel chairman. Whilst this was declared policy in the last RAE, the British Academy is concerned that it appears to have been ignored in a number of cases.
15. The British Academy believes that one way to minimise the risk of bias is to increase even further the opportunities for input from the subject community into the selection of panel members. However, we are concerned that subject associations are not always the best way of soliciting opinion and urge that further consultations are held, including input from the user community. The Academy would also be prepared to assist in panel selection.
16. It also believes that overseas membership of panels is essential, both to provide an element of international comparison within UoAs, and to allow a measure of comparison between UoAs. In the 2001 exercise, submissions which had been given provisional ratings of 5 and 5 star were sent to up to five non-UK based experts for second opinions. They were not expected to read any of the research cited, and were told to spend not more than one working day on it. Whilst they no doubt acted as a useful safety net in some cases, the use of non-UK assessors was clearly limited. The British Academy believes that there is a case for increasing the involvement of non-UK assessors in future research assessments, while recognising that care needs to be taken to ensure that they understand the proper context of the exercise. It thinks that an 'external international examiner' system should be introduced, whereby the international assessors would look not only at the most highly graded submissions, but also at those at the bottom and on the margins.

Incentives not to participate in the RAE

17. The British Academy believes that there should be incentives to encourage institutions with a weak record in research not to participate in the research assessment exercise. If the incentives are sufficiently attractive, it would clearly be in the interests of these departments and institutions not to participate in the RAE and to focus instead on areas of strength, and at the same time it would also reduce the number of submissions and make the research assessment exercise less burdensome.

The number of items of research to be evaluated

18. A balance must be struck between an adequate number of items to be evaluated, and an inadvertent emphasis on volume. Different subjects could be asked to define their own criteria, mediated by expert views of the appropriate learned societies and official institutions within their disciplines. These criteria need to be explicit to institutions and to panel members.

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

19. The British Academy believes that the most important thing is that the exercise should be dynamic. It is difficult to see how this can be achieved except through an assessment of past performance and prospective plans.

What objective data should the assessors consider?

20. Whilst information on matters such as postgraduate numbers, staff movements and research income helps to supplement and balance the peer review, it should not outweigh the qualitative assessments.

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

21. Given the unevenness of research quality within most HEIs, we think it would be difficult to make an assessment of an institution as a whole. The British Academy believes that the assessments should continue to be organised around individual subjects and groupings, which allows for flexibility in entering sub-groups or combinations of departments.

Is there an alternative to organising the assessment around subjects or thematic areas?

22. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is a common perception that the RAE has discouraged interdisciplinary research. In addition, concerns have been raised that institutions genuinely engaged in interdisciplinary research have had difficulties in deciding into which unit to put themselves. Since this is such an important issue, it is recommended that the Working Group should identify mechanisms which would reassure the academic community on this matter. It believes that the umbrella panels could be useful here (see paragraph 29).

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

23. It would be almost impossible to prevent the research assessments being used by HEIs for management purposes. This affects not only the actual rating, but also the nature and mode of delivery of the feedback to institutions – which seems to be one of the outstanding problems that needs to be addressed. The 2001 exercise introduced a more detailed feedback system, with the aim of helping HEIs make planning decisions, but we understand that it was not seen as all that helpful. Of course, it is inherently difficult to provide meaningful feedback. Protecting the confidentiality of individuals places strong constraints on the information that can be given. As a result, feedback can become either so noncommittal or so cryptic as to be virtually useless. Any steps to improve the feedback given to institutions would probably raise the costs and time spent on the exercise. However, the provision of feedback would be easier and the process more transparent if the criteria used by the panels were more explicit. Given the importance placed by institutions on feedback, it is recommended that the Working Group should give further consideration to this issue.

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

24. The British Academy believes that a greater interval between exercises would help the administrative burden on the sector, and that the interval should be extended from four/five years to six/seven. This would serve to reduce the very high costs associated with running the present system, and to reduce the pressures on academic staff that in some cases result in research being given too high a priority against other goals, and a surfeit of publications. At present, the results of one exercise are barely announced before institutions start preparations for the next as publication lags are so long. Whilst the suggestion of assessing research on a rolling basis is superficially attractive in that it would stagger the workload, it would mean that institutions would not have any respite from the exercise and would be subject to continuous assessment. It also would not reduce the volume of work. Moreover, a rolling programme of assessment would undoubtedly create problems for the assessment of multi-disciplinary submissions.

25. Related to the issue of the interval between exercises is the matter of differing practices between the humanities and social sciences as to the time period within which submitted publications may fall. The Funding Councils permit departments within the humanities to submit outputs from the previous six years, as opposed to four for the social sciences. The type of work undertaken in many areas of the social sciences is, in principle, identical to that for the humanities and does not warrant differential treatment. The Academy believes that there should be uniformity of practice in areas where the work is essentially of the same kind.

What is excellence in research?

26. The British Academy believes that quality in research should mean just intellectual excellence. The quality of any specific research output can be judged in terms of its:

- creativity
- technical merits
- substantive contribution
- empirical relevance
- scholarship, and
- stimulus to further developments.

The British Academy thinks it is important that the panels should be required to give a more detailed description of what 'intellectual excellence' means for their subject, including the criteria of judgement that each panel will employ.

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

27. There are obvious problems besetting every one of the six listed ways for determining 'subject pots', but the first - the quality of UK research in the subject, benchmarked against international competition - is arguably the least problematical.

Should each institution be assessed in the same way?

28. Yes, if there are sufficient incentives to encourage institutions with weaker research records not to submit to the research assessment exercise. (see paragraph 17)

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

29. It is important that wherever possible there should be common criteria and working methods for the different panels, although there should also be sufficient flexibility within the system to enable panels to meet any particular needs of their subject. This is important as it helps to align similar disciplines and to ensure comparability of treatment of interdisciplinary research (see paragraph 22). We understand that this has happened to a limited extent in past research assessment exercises. The establishment of 'umbrella groups' has helped the panels to standardise practice and ensure consistency. The Academy welcomes these steps to ensure that the panels have comparable working methods and procedures. The Academy believes the process would be assisted by more explicit criteria for assessment being issued by panels. It hopes therefore that the umbrella groups will become a more important feature of future research assessments.

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

30. One of the criticisms levelled at the RAE is that institutions have the freedom to choose which researchers to submit and can also move researchers between units of assessment. It has been argued that this encourages gamesmanship. We believe that this is a minor problem. Any rules will prompt tactics. The Academy believes that allowing institutions the freedom to put together their

submissions helps them to focus the attention of the panels on the work and activities that they believe are the most important. If institutions do not have this discretion, the volume of material submitted to the RAE would no doubt increase considerably. In addition, the British Academy is strongly opposed to any change to the system so that the decisions on who should be included, together with the unit to which they should be submitted, would be taken out of the hands of departments and institutions.

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

31. It is proposed that the three most important features are that an assessment process should be: rigorous; fair to academics and institutions; and transparent.

OTHER ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Cost weights

32. The credibility of the funding allocation formula needs to be as high as that of the assessment process. Under the current system, the cost of research determines the funding that is allocated to it. The funding weights reflect the relative costs of conducting research in different disciplines. But there may be times when high costs may be the result of inefficiency. The British Academy is concerned that this approach locks in historical anomalies in funding, so that UoAs that have been better funded in the past are able to undertake more expensive research, which in turn will lead to higher levels of funding in the future. Similarly, the subjects which traditionally have been less well funded may find it difficult to evolve and develop innovative practices that have high cost implications, such as the use of sophisticated information technology. The British Academy believes that a detailed reconsideration of the funding allocation formula is overdue, and it recommends that serious consideration be given to this issue.

Measuring excellence

33. The purpose of the research assessment exercises is to recognise and encourage research of a good standard (accepting that some might be better than others and that some element of grading would indeed be part of the process). It should also be able to identify and reward the very best research. The British Academy is concerned that the current rating scale is crude and this undermines the proper recognition of excellence. The introduction of a more finely grained graduated scale would help to identify the research at the very top and bottom of the range. It would also reduce panel debates on borderline cases, and lessen the probability of small classification mistakes by submitters and panels. An alternative to the current ratings would be to introduce a system to grade each item of work submitted by a researcher, which could also give more weight to the best of the items considered rather than equal weights for all items. The scores gained by researchers could then be cumulated across each department, and the total score gained by each department would determine the funding that they would receive. This system would enable the panels to determine with greater precision where the centres of excellence are located and the proportion that are at any given level. This approach could also be used for more transparent feedback and would have the additional benefit of encouraging panels to be more explicit about the criteria they are using.