

RESPONSE FROM THE SCOTTISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION TO THE JOINT FUNDING BODIES REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Prepared by Donald Christie, President of SERA donald.christie@strath.ac.uk

1. Introductory Remarks

The Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) welcomes the rationale, scope and 'content' of the review as set out in the consultation document. The aims of SERA are to promote and enhance the culture of educational research in Scotland. Ultimately, the purpose of any research assessment exercise should be the same. Unfortunately in the Education Unit of Assessment (Unit 68) the overall track record of RAE, in terms of enhancing research quality and research capacity in Scotland, has not been very successful.

2. Impact of Previous Research Assessment Exercises

That education has not fared well from previous RAEs is very clear. The Scottish figures are stark. In terms of numbers returned as research active there has been a dramatic fall over the last assessment period, from 321 returned in 1996 to only 163 in 2001. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that the 2001 figure is significantly lower even than the 212 returned in 1992. Analysis at the institutional level is problematic due to the proliferation of mergers taking place during the last decade between former colleges of education and the universities. However, the overall drop in numbers of RAE research-active staff can be attributed principally to two main factors: (1) the strategy adopted by many of the previously research active faculties to restrict their entry to ensure the highest possible grading – a strategy which was felt to be unavoidable since it was known that a rating of '4' would be necessary to guarantee any SHEFC funding for research; and (2) the decision taken by several of the institutions not to waste scarce resources by preparing an entry for the exercise at all, knowing that they were unlikely to achieve the necessary rating. The trend over the three exercises 1992, 1996 and 2001 can be seen in the figure below from Kirkwood (2002). It is worth noting that in RAE 2001, there were actually no '5'-rated institutions, though four institutions, the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling and Strathclyde received ratings of '4'.

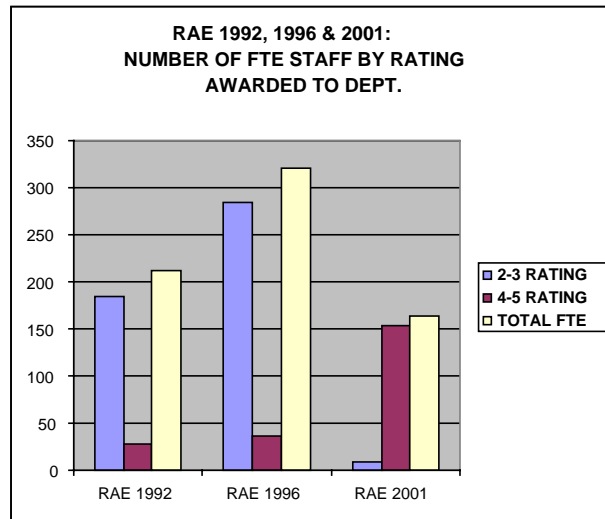


Figure: *Outcomes of RAE in Scottish HEIs (Education Unit of Assessment): numbers of staff by ratings awarded.*

(Source Kirkwood, M. (2002) Educational research in Scotland: policy, context and key issues. *BERA Research and Intelligence*, 79, 33-40.)

The effect of all this on the overall funding of educational research has been far from beneficial. Analysis of SHEFC figures shows that the annual research income awarded to HEIs in Scotland has fallen as a result of the 2001 RAE from a total of approximately £2.8M in 2000-2001 (the last year when income was based on RAE 1996) to £2.35M in 2001-2002 (the first year in which income was based on RAE 2001).

The effects on staff morale across the sector are harder to quantify, but SERA members have expressed serious concerns about the detrimental effects felt both in institutions which chose not to enter the RAE in 2001 and in faculties/departments where many who considered themselves research active were excluded from the entries which were returned in order to achieve the maximum rating.

SHEFC and the Scottish Executive Education Department recognising the problems facing educational research in Scotland, launched in June 2002 a joint £2M Applied Educational Research Scheme, which SERA strongly welcomes. This scheme invites bidders to come up with project plans which can both deliver valuable evidence in the context of the Scottish Executive's national priorities in education and at the same time serve to build research capacity in Scotland. It is hoped that constructive collaborations at both the institutional and the individual level across the whole sector will be facilitated by the research activities funded by the scheme, but SERA would be concerned if this were seen as a one-off 'quick fix'. Resourcing over the longer term needs to be protected so that genuinely developmental work can be accomplished in the sector.

Overall as far as SERA is concerned if the pitfalls of previous exercises are to be avoided and if research assessment is to be genuinely beneficial to educational research in Scotland, any future RAE should be more forward looking and place more emphasis on what institutions are doing to develop the prevailing research culture and to encourage new researchers in a field which is rather different from many other disciplines, in that it has a particularly strong relationship with both the policy and professional practice communities. It also has quite different requirements in terms of research training and building research capacity, since the majority of those undertaking postgraduate research degrees do so as part-time students while continuing as practising professional educators.

At a time when education is the focus of political concerns, and with the sector awaiting the action plan ensuing from national education debate in Scotland, the strategic importance of research in

education has never been greater. Wherever it takes place - in child care settings, in schools, in communities, in further education colleges or in higher education institutions - education should be informed by good quality research evidence. If the link is to be made effectively between teaching and research in the interests of the profession as a whole, there is a need for all teachers to be professionally educated in research active environments. The outcome of any worthwhile research assessment exercise should be that research activity is encouraged in all, and not discouraged in any of the faculties of education.

Responses to Specific Questions in the Consultation Document

Expert Review

Peer review probably needs to be a significant part of any assessment exercise. The composition of any panel of peer reviewers is, of course, a major issue to which consideration should be given by the funding councils. In the case of education, we are not entirely convinced that the panel was truly representative of the interface between research and relevant professional perspectives.

- 7(a) There needs to be a balance between retrospective and prospective assessment. In comparison with RAE 2001, SERA would prefer to see the role of the prospective element enhanced.
- 7(b) While peer assessed output must feature and research income may also be a potentially valid source of data, more consideration of the link between the research and teaching missions of HEIs, would also be worthy of inclusion in a new section similar to RA5. While this would be hard to quantify, the some link to QAA parameters might be feasible. The new QAA institutional review quality indicators might include a reference to the quality of the research 'climate' and the extent to which teaching is informed by, and informs, research. The relationship between research in education and the relevant policy and professional practice communities should also figure. A neglected interface in the documentation so date is that between Higher and Further Education.
- 7(c/d) Education has a strong case to be retained as a 'subject' or unit of assessment in its own right enabling all the researchers in a given institution who are interested in education to be considered together.
- 7(e) Members have expressed the view that better representation from the former public sector institutions, in this case the former colleges of education, would be desirable in order to bring to bear a more grounded perception of quality and potential impact.

Algorithm

There is a need for greater transparency in elements which might figure in any algorithm, such as the 'counting value' of the hierarchy of journals. There is also a need for more openness, both before and during the exercise, about the financial outcomes of the assessment exercise, as well as on the processes of computation of quality measures. However, the danger of manipulation is likely to loom large under such an open and predictable system.

- 8. Some use of metrics might be acceptable and these may include: external research income; *some* bibliometric measures (publications but not citations); and research student completions, though any system would have to accommodate part-time patterns of study.
- 10. We do not think it appropriate to base assessment entirely on metrics. Reliability and validity remain will always be challenged. It is always going to be difficult to agree on what is worth measuring. If metrics are good they should help track progress over time.

Self Assessment

It is felt that colleagues will be only be comfortable with self-assessment procedures, which follow the metrics of an external review exercise, if the measures used are perceived as sound. Such structured self-assessment could make a positive contribution to the internal audit and forward

planning of research activity. However, self-assessment can only be part of any research assessment exercise. It clearly needs to be carefully validated. There might be merit in the idea of validators assessing a sample of such assessments in detail.

- 13(b) Self-assessments should be a combination of retrospective audit of research activity and output, on the one hand, and prospective consideration of future research plans and development work, on the other.
- 13(c) Self-assessment is no less burdensome than expert review

Historical Ratings

What is needed here is some good quality analysis of the outcomes of previous RAE exercises. The encouragement of strategic development should be an aim of the system. Generally speaking historical ratings as the exclusive basis for funding would not help institutions who are genuinely attempting to expand and develop research capacity. More forward looking approaches would be preferable.

Crosscutting themes

- 18(b) It can be argued that optimum period is five years as long as the system is not too burdensome. A rolling basis of phasing of RAE for clusters of subjects, akin to the phasing of QAA subject reviews, might be helpful in enabling the two processes to be 'in-synch'. On the other hand, this may place an intolerable load on those involved.
- 18(c) Quality of research in education should not be narrowly defined in methodological terms. The gold standard of large-scale empirical studies in the form of randomised control trials is not appropriate in Education unit of assessment. Fitness for purpose is key criterion and multi-method approaches are to be encouraged.

For the education unit of assessment, it could be argued that the exercise should take a broader view of what is admissible output and recognise the importance of published, research-based curriculum development materials and resources. Furthermore, the RAE should take account of a far wider range of publications than the present emphasis on paper based work. Electronic publications, which will increasingly become the norm, should count, again as long as they are published by an academically recognised body, or organisation, and properly peer reviewed.

- 18(h) There is a need for some careful monitoring of equity issues in research assessment and funding. The Funding Councils should initiate a careful review of the extent to which previous RAE exercises have been discriminatory.
 - 18(i) In the view of SERA, the three priorities should be:-
 Transparency Fairness Not being burdensome
-