

## Joint Funding Bodies Review of Research Assessment

### Response from the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies (AUDTRS)

The response below was formulated following a meeting of members of AUDTRS (The Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies). Members of AUDTRS departments, of which there are approximately 50, normally provide the membership of the RAE Panel for UoA63. The statement below represents the recommendations of a good number of AUDTRS departments, large and small, representing pre- and post-1992 universities, but not all departments could send a representative to the meeting and other views on the RAE as it affects UoA63 will undoubtedly be fed back through institutional responses.

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The following document represents broad agreement amongst those present on a number of points but includes some individual suggestions or comments which were noted, but not necessarily endorsed by all present.

The following key points were generally agreed:

- 1 Arts and Humanities disciplines should be assessed by a set of criteria and through processes which reflect the distinctive nature of research, the patterns of publication and dissemination and the funding mechanisms in those disciplines rather than being subject to a set of criteria applied to all disciplines. These disciplines might be reviewed at longer intervals than the sciences, for instance.
- 2 Expert review was the favoured method of assessment, but this should cover a wider scope than assessment of publications. Algorithmic and historical assessment were not considered appropriate. An element of self-assessment was seen as a helpful part of the process but this would depend on there being clear guidelines as to the benchmarks for assessment and validly different possible aspirations for departments (e.g. a concentration on research postgraduate training set against a lower publication profile) which would still attract research funding. Certainly an element of coordinated reporting, rather than assessment, of the research profile of individuals and units of assessment is necessary.
- 3 The present rubric of 'up to four publications' found little support. There was a general desire to allow for a more complete overview of an individual or organisation's research activity, but also a concern that the volume of material to be reviewed may be excessive. The nomination of one or two items which represent the researcher's best quality work out of a full profile might meet the case.
- 4 There was a general agreement that the criteria should enable credit to be given to the dissemination of research so that textbooks and other publications in whatever medium which communicate the best research to a wider audience could receive encouragement.
- 5 There was a strong feeling that there should be an appeals system in place. It was acknowledged that appeals on academic judgment cause difficulties, but a system whereby a department could request a new review within, say, two years was suggested.

Further concerns raised by members of the group included the following;

- 6 Though Theology and Religious Studies is a relatively small unit of assessment numerically, it covers a very wide range of disciplines which poses a particular burden for any review panel. In addition, the range of disciplines represented in any one department may often give it a unique research profile with particular opportunities and problems. The use of expert advisors and the incorporation of the forms of peer assessment that already exist, e.g. book reviews (although various drawbacks were pointed out in relation to the latter) seems particularly appropriate. It was suggested that the panel could be subdivided, but not all present saw this as necessary.
- 7 There was a strong majority feeling that all contracted research active staff should be included in the assessment. This would require, however, that special circumstances such as illness or the constraints on staff in the first years of their appointment should be taken fully into account.

8 There was a strong concern in some quarters that account be taken of the position of the lone researcher who may, for instance, produce internationally recognised publication but have difficulty demonstrating that she is part of an identifiable local research culture in the discipline.

9 A matrix approach with weighting might facilitate the reporting of interdisciplinary research, which is a feature of many TRS departments.

10 An individual research dossier including an account of research activity, publication and evidence of peer esteem and research dissemination might form a useful and to some extent standardised basis for the reporting of research activity.

11 The criteria for assessment should be set out as transparently as possible to minimise the inevitable but time-wasting effort of research-active staff to 'double-guess' the assessors' interpretation of the criteria.