British Association for Information & Library Education and Research

Heads of Schools and Departments Committee

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Dear Ms Conte

Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment: invitation to contribute

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BAILER, the British Association for Information and Library Education and Research, is the body which represents the interests of lecturers and researchers within the field of library and information management. Thus in RAE terms our interests lie principally within the field of Unit of Assessment 61. The Heads of Schools and Departments Committee is the policy making body of BAILER. BAILER is pleased to make its contribution to the debate on the future of the Research Assessment Exercise. It has not been possible to conduct a full scale consultation with the membership of BAILER and this response has been compiled as result of e-mail consultation. The response has been written by Dick Hartley, the Secretary of the Heads of Schools and Departments Committee to whom any correspondence should be directed.

This response is divided into two sections, Firstly a series of general comments on the assessment exercise and secondly a series of specific comments on the six group areas highlighted by the Joint Funding Bodies in the Notes for Facilitators (Annex B) of the Invitation to Contribute document.

1. **Introductory Comments**

The three most important characteristics of an assessment process, it should be

- rigorous

- fair to individuals and institutions and
- transparent

Furthermore we believe that the transparency should extend to the criteria and process of selection of members of panels. The current process invites accusations of the existence of an old girl/boy network. Selection should be subject to external audit.

There is a case to be made for greater clarity in the definition of quality as applied to research assessment. In terms of the RAE, quality has been seen to be “intellectual excellence”. However, the classic definitions of “quality” are to do with “fitness for purpose” or “conformance to requirements”. Quality, as the quality management literature has made clear for a very long time, cannot be divorced from the customer, user or – more broadly - stakeholder. The quality of research is more properly understood, then, as a judgment of the fitness of research, or maybe more accurately of research output, for their intended audiences. In LIM, an important measure of the value of research undertaken is its value added to professional practice i.e. the impact of the research on the non-academic world. A clear implication of this analysis is that at least one additional model should be added to those suggested in paragraph 19, namely “Stakeholder Assessment”. In academic research terms, this would imply an enhanced role for communities which are affected by research (in any of a variety of ways). It is a very different proposition from “expert review”. It might, for example, use unobtrusive and unannounced testing of research outputs by stakeholders.

It seems crucial to have an unambiguously agreed purpose for the Research Assessment Exercise. Unfortunately, paragraph 8 of the Consultation Paper – which to be fair merely follows on from the Terms of Reference – immediately confuses the issue. It speaks of the assessment as being an assessment of “quality in research”, as if **this** is the purpose of the exercise, but then immediately says “as we are … using the information to calculate funding entitlements ….”. In other words, the purpose is **really** to develop a method for calculating funding. To confuse things even further, the paper immediately admits that research quality is not the sole basis of such an assessment – “(it) has to include an assessment of (the institutions’) contribution to the development of researchers ….”. So, are we attempting to assess research quality or are we attempting to devise a funding methodology, in which research quality will be one criterion? Clarity of the purpose of the exercise is a pre-requisite of a successful result. Thus we hope that an outcome of the review will be that the purpose of future RAE’s will be stated unambiguously. A clear understanding of the purpose(s) of the exercise, for example if it is more than a means for distributing funds, might lead to a clear need for the adoption of different assessment methodologies.

2. Specific comments

2.1 Expert review (including peer review)

The major strengths of the approach are its familiarity and its use of assessment practices which represent a consensus within the leadership of the discipline. Its major weaknesses are its vulnerability to self-satisfaction and “peer back-scratching”, its isolation from research users and non-expert communities (a problem of more concern in some fields than others), and its tendency to distort research behaviour.

It is important that research assessment becomes a more transparent process or there is a danger of it generating disenchantment. Assessment by experts is a system that should provide confidence in the outcomes. However the current lack of transparency in the criteria and their application by Panels could not be considered acceptable. There appeared to be considerable variations in the depth with which individual Panels defined the evidence that would be considered relevant. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that individual Panels applied different weightings to the criteria and may even have applied criteria that were not in the public domain. In particular the definition of what achieves national/international standing needs to be more clearly formulated. It is perfectly proper for Panels to define and apply weightings to criteria that reflect the nature of their discipline but these must be clearly defined and known to all those making submissions. Any future exercise should be preceded by substantially greater effort to define and publicise the criteria and the weightings attached to them. This should then lead to greater acceptance of the results than we have seen in some areas. We would wish to make clear that this is a general comment and is not intended as a comment on the operation of Panel 61.

Since we believe that there is evidence that past performance and future performance are correlated, evidence of past performance should form one indicator. However, the evidence base for this decision needs to be made explicit. Since funding will be allocated for future research, evidence of research potential should also be used.

There is a need for more research into the correlation between different objective datasets and future research performance. However, the evidence would seem to suggest that such data as external funding levels, citation counts and research student completions are useful indicators. In addition it would be useful to develop an understanding of those circumstances in which objective datasets are NOT a good indicator of future performance.

2.2 algorithm based entirely upon quantitative metrics

If there is evidence that algorithms can produce as good an assessment as more expensive approaches then these should be considered. It may be that some element of research funding would need to be set aside to be handled differently, especially where future potential was to be supported. Thus, on their own, algorithms are unlikely to be sufficient. The obvious metrics are citation counts, external funding and research student completions.

Whilst many links can be shown between bibliometric studies and the results of research assessment exercises, the proponents of this metric have never satisfactorily explained how to deal with some situations. For example, it is necessary to have a means with which to compensate for individual researchers whose high quality work is published in monographs or journals that are not indexed by the various ISI citation indexes. Nor has it been explained how to deal with those researchers whose subject is too new or in too narrow an area to attract substantial numbers of citations.

The major danger with algorithms is that institutions, departments and individuals quickly learn to play the game, using strategies which increase their scores rather than improve their research. The Joint Funding Councils are keen to minimize game playing in any future system.

The strengths of this approach are its relative cheapness and apparent independence of vested interests. The weaknesses of this approach are that it is impossible to use in isolation since some important factors are not amenable to quantitative approaches e.g. future potential, the academic quality of a research output (the LIM panel found some work of less than internationally excellent standard in journals with international reputation).

2.3 self-assessment

Self-assessment could be based on the existing RAE model. The current RA5 appears to provide ample scope for detailing the various dimensions of research activity. It would be necessary to combine retrospective and prospective assessment and there would need to be a strong emphasis on evidence-based prospective assessment. To have credibility self-assessment would need tobe coupled with some form of external review.

A major problem with self-assessment as suggested is that it is institution-based, while institutions have no mechanism to judge the comparative performance of their research teams against others in the same discipline. Since the purpose of the exercise is to determine which institutions should receive which block of funding, this is not a satisfactory state of affairs. We note, however, that an element of self-assessment is useful (and was included in the last RAE in RA5) since it enables evaluators to judge how realistic research plans are in relation to activity.

2.4 historical ratings

It would seem extraordinary that in a world which is characterised by an ever increasing rate of change, research funding should be thought to remain largely stable over long periods of time. This approach would reward lethargy and penalise dynamism. It would stultify the development of new research strengths, especially in institutions which were unable to command a share of the research resource proportionate to their size. Yet these could be the very departments where new research areas emerge. As noted in section 2.1, research assessment would be used as a means of determining future funding and therefore some means of assessing future potential is crucial. Assessment based solely on past performance is simply unacceptable.

2.5 Crosscutting Themes

Rolling assessment could be used as a means of smoothing the total effort, but there is considerable danger that it would add to the assessment workload. To enable departments to concentrate on actually doing research, assessment should be no more often than every five years.

The issue of quality was addressed in the introductory section. One might also ask, what is the difference between “research quality” and “research excellence”? It is also worth remembering that “the best can be the enemy of the good” – are we sure that it is better, in the long term, to have one small pocket of “excellent” research rather than a number of loci of “good research”? How, for example, does this relate to the regionalisation agenda so prominent in the government’s priorities?

It is important that the same basic methodology, but with variations which are appropriate to different subjects, is used to enable inter-institutional comparisons. As in 2001, subject panels should set specific criteria. These need to be made explicit well in advance of the assessment exercise.

2.6 Other matters; Have you missed anything

There are many private research organizations, think tanks etc, much favoured by the current government. If we are in the age of joined up government/ thinking should they not also be subjected to similar scrutiny if they are being awarded public money?

We hope that these comments are of value to you and would appreciate the opportunity to be involved in further stages of the review process.

Yours sincerely

Dick Hartley
Secretary
BAILER Heads of Schools and Departments Committee