CONTRIBUTION FROM THE BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION TO THE JOINT FUNDING BODIES REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Prepared by Professor Michael Bassey, Academic Secretary, BERA in discussion with BERA Executive Council

BERA is the premier learned society for educational research in the UK with nearly 1500 members, the majority of whom are in higher education institutions. Our aim is to enhance research culture in educational practice, educational policy and educational theory and in relation to all levels of learning including early years, school, further, higher, adult, and work-place education. This aim parallels that of the Governments of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales who all recognise the important of educational policy and practice being research-based. Any measures which reduce the extent of educational research would be seen as inimical to national aspirations.

1. ASSESSMENT IS NECESSARILY LINKED TO FUNDING POLICY

1.1 The consultation document in paragraph 26 gives an invitation to generate ideas and insights and so, at the outset we comment on the long term perspective.

1.2 The RAE needs to be seen in a long term perspective about the funding of research. In 1992 the ratings of 2, 3, 4 and 5 were differentially funded and rating 1 was not funded; in 1996 the ratings of 3B, 3A, 4, 5, and 5* were differentially funded and ratings 1 and 2 not funded; in 2001 the ratings of 3A, 4, 5, and 5* were differentially funded and ratings 1, 2 and 3B not funded[1]. Thus the issue of assessment is inextricably connected to the issue of funding and to discuss one without the other is potentially a waste of effort.

1.3 Various scenarios of assessment / funding can be envisaged. For example:

SCENARIO A 'Business as usual' operates in terms of assessment, with *selectivity and differential funding continuing*: after RAE 2006 only 4, 5, and 5* departments are funded and after RAE 2012 only 5 and 5* departments. By then fewer departments would be entering and the assessment workload on institutions and panels would diminish. As the chart in section 2 suggests this would be disastrous for Education if present trends continue.

SCENARIO B Suppose it were decided that *selectivity and differential funding have now achieved their purpose* in raising the quality of research and that from 2006 onwards the same level of funding were made available by the HEFCs to every bona fide active researcher within a subject discipline. The work of assessment panels would become reduced to deciding how many people in a department's submission were active researchers. This could be a very much simpler job than juggling with different levels of achievement using the ill-defined and variously constructed definitions of 'national' and 'international' levels of excellence. (See appended article from our Association journal *Research Intelligence*) Perhaps the funding from 2006 to 2012 would be cushioned by introducing a historical element from the 2001 assessment. But thereafter it could be rigorously the same for all within the subject discipline. If the level of funding was at the current 5 level, this scenario would be acceptable to nearly everyone - but would entail new money being available. But if

[1] This was the position in England in 2001. Scotland only funds certain 3As while Wales is funding 3Bs: however no Education entries to the RAE 2001 came in these categories.

the level of funding was lower, damage would be done to many department's research efforts and would certainly be of great concern in Education.

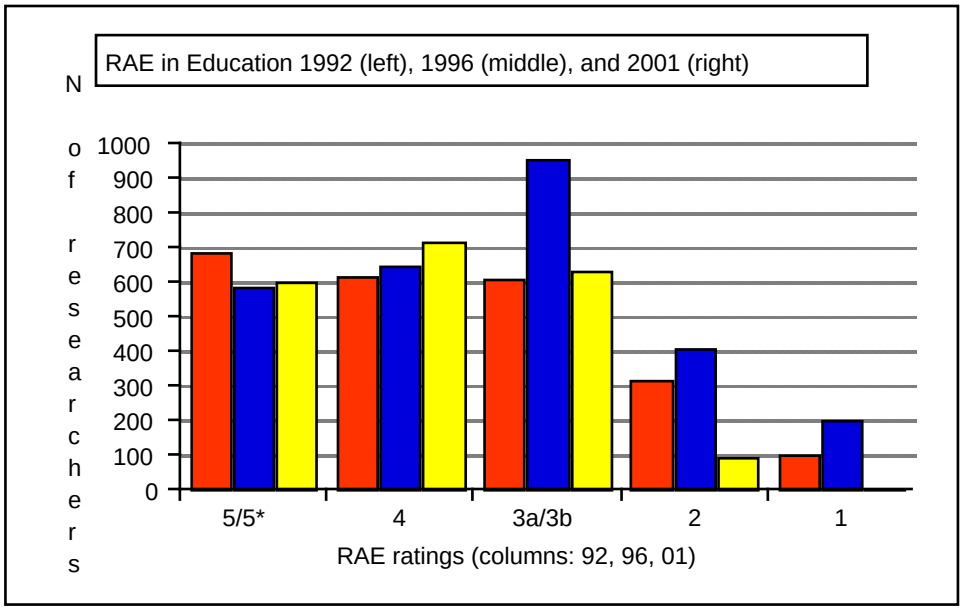
SCENARIO C Suppose it were decided that *selectivity in funding, but not differential funding, has achieved its purpose*. Research assessment continues in some form and departments are rated as now (or in a simpler form as in 1992). On a differential basis all grades from 2 to 5 are funded, it being recognised that this encourages excellence by providing incentives to move up the ladder and by the possibility of descending! Building a vibrant research culture takes many years and in Education, particularly in the post 92 universities, many departments are slowly making progress. This scenario would be appropriate for Education.

1.4 A further funding issue is whether one subject discipline should have a different level of funding to another. It can be argued that what the HEFCs research funding should provide is the time for an academic teacher to do some research, and funding for equipment, materials and research assistants should come from other sources as part of the concept of dual funding. If there is to be a banding system we would argue that educational research predominantly requires time-consuming fieldwork, interviews, surveys etc and so should not be in the band predominantly based on library work.

2. ASSESSMENT RESULTS IN EDUCATION OVER THREE RAEs

2.1 The chart overleaf explores the effect that the RAE has had on Education over three exercises. Little change in the numbers of researchers in 5/5* and 4 rated departments, an increase in numbers of researchers in lower rated departments in 1996 and by 2001 very few in the lower ratings. As was said by this Association to HEFCE in the 1999 review in response to the question 'What evidence is there for the effects of the selective allocation of funding by HEFCE?': 'It seems that diamonds are being dimmed, pebbles polished and - to change the metaphor - aspiring new entrants to research are being strangled at birth'.

2.2 Suffice to say that members of our Association have variously expressed concern (in our journal *Research Intelligence* and elsewhere) about the adverse effects of the RAE on their work. The most serious of these is discussed in the next section.



3. THE IMPLICATIONS OF ZERO FUNDING FOR THE 3B AND 2 RATED DEPARTMENTS IN TERMS OF SCHOOL TEACHING AS A RESEARCH-BASED PROFESSION

3.1 Until 1992 much academic educational research in England was carried out in the schools of education of 23 of the 'old' universities[2], but over the last ten years nearly every university and college engaged in initial teacher training has developed an educational research profile: 62 of them entered for the 2001 RAE. But it takes a long time to develop a high level research culture and only one of the 'new entrants', Manchester Metropolitan University, got as high as a '4' rating.

3.2 The decision that only departments rated 3A and above should be eligible for funding (in England) means that the 23 ITE institutions in England who achieved less get no financial support for research. (18 scored '3B', 5 scored '2' and, significantly, none hit the bottom of the scale)[3]. HEFCE has now also decided that such departments should get no public funding for post-graduate students, although over 400 students, mainly part-time, are currently registered for research degrees at these institutions. The consequence of these decisions by HEFCE is likely to be that the slowly growing research culture of these institutions, amounting to about a third of those currently training teachers, will be destroyed.

3.3 Government, in looking for excellence in school teaching, has embraced the idea that teaching should become a research-based profession. But if teaching is to be research-based then teacher education too must be research-based and there lies our major concern. For while departments of education in HEIs have been climbing the ladder of research excellence many of them have not moved fast enough to achieve funding in the 2001 RAE and their research-base may disappear.

3.4 Appended is our letter to the Secretary of State (which has been copied to the Chief Executives of HEFCE and the TTA) suggesting that alternative funding from the Teacher Training Agency would be in order. But we think that the HEFCs should recognise the problem that the RAE is causing, including the implications for research students in institutions which are trying hard to raise their standards.

3.5 In making this point it is important for us to note that not all institutions entered for the Education unit of assessment in the RAE are engaged in teacher education and only a proportion of educational research is geared towards school education. There is plenty of high quality educational research (as judged by the RAE) that is not relevant, nor need be, to schools.

4. RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS IN THE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

B7a *Should the assessments be prospective, retrospective or a combination of the two?* A combination of retrospective and prospective assessments seems appropriate, ie achievements and potential.

B7b *What objective data should assessors consider?*It is not easy to see an alternative to the reading of proffered research publications as the objective data.

B7c *At what level should assessments be made – individuals, groups, departments, research institutes, or higher education institutions?*In terms of Education the notion of seeing the institution's body of educational researchers as the unit seems appropriate. Usually, but not always, this is the department, faculty of school of study.

[2] Educational research was also carried out in other social science departments (eg psychology, philosophy, sociology) and today, in addition, some departments of science and engineering (for example) have educational researchers looking at the teaching of their disciplines.

[3] In consequence in England only 43% of ITE students are based in institutions receiving QR funding.

B10a *Is it, in principle, acceptable to assess research entirely on the basis of metrics?* It is widely agreed in Education that bibliometrics are not a satisfactory form of research assessment. Research student numbers is also problematic because of the high proportion of part-time students in Education.

B13 *Self-assessment?* Self-assessment has the merit of being educational for the self-assessors. It could be done using the criteria produced by Panels in 2001 - Education had a particularly well expressed and rigorous approach. Presumably it could be moderated by samples taken by external reviewers.

B16 *Historical funding?* Historical funding is prejudicial to those who aspire to develop their research potential. Many educational research institutions are slowly climbing the ladder. But an element of historical funding gives continuity, and, for example, encourages longitudical studies.

B18c *What is excellence in research?* Excellence in research may be a chimera. What can be identified with reasonable certainty are the characteristics of bad research - for example where there are major flaws in research design, serious weaknesses in data analysis, conclusions that do not arise from the evidence, etc.

B18i *Three priorities for an assessment process:* (1) rigorous between disciplines as well as within disciplines; (2) much less burdensome than at present; (3) transparent to all involved.

APPENDIX ONE From BERA's *Research Intelligence* 78 (February 2002)

EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES NOW FILL A CUPBOARD

Michael Bassey

What is international excellence? For RAE96 the Law Panel stated that, 'interpreted literally, and as defined in Annex B of RAE96 1/94, "international excellence" would be difficult or impossible to achieve in the context of some areas of work'. Consequently this panel introduced the concept of 'a primary reference point in its field' as the mark of intellectual excellence. This definition was again used in 2001. In contrast, the Clinical Laboratory Sciences Panel, in its criteria statement for RAE2001, said: 'The Panel recognises that much medical research in the UK is of international standing'.

For RAE2001 panels were expected to indicate the general criteria they would use for assessment and show how 'international excellence' would be distinguished. The following examples of how different panels tackled these questions show how difficult a task this is. (They are roughly in order of length of extracted descriptors).

They fall into three groups, viz:

- judgement of quality, ie: 'highest quality';
- influence on other researchers, ie: 'primary point of reference for workers in the field', 'sets the international agenda', ''has impact on international academic community'; and
- intrinsic qualities of the research, ie: 'innovative', 'significant understanding', 'modifies existing theory', 'modifies existing practice', 'conceptual development', 'major contribution to knowledge',

Each of these characteristics remains undefined. Those of us who previously felt that the generalised concept of 'international excellence' had no more substance than the Emperor's new clothes may now feel that one set of nothings has by 2001 been replaced by a whole cupboard of nothings, with one such suit for each Unit of Assessment.

POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
General criteria: the depth of material, marshalling of evidence, clarity and accessibility, accuracy, theoretical advance, reliability, persuasiveness, rigour of analysis or conceptual or other methodological innovation
International excellence: equates to work of highest quality. It denotes work with which any researcher in the field or sub-field ought to engage.

PHILOSOPHY
General criteria: originality, contribution to knowledge and understanding, impact on the discipline and scholarly rigour.
International excellence: which is or ought to be a primary point of reference in the field, ie a contribution of whose general theme every serious worker in the field is or ought to be aware.

ECONOMICS
General criteria: (i) Substantive contribution in the broad sense, including research contributions to theory, methodology, policy and practice; (ii) Originality; (iii) Technical excellence.
International excellence: interpreted within a wide international context. This will be defined by reference to high quality research activity, where it has been identified, around the world.

PHYSICS
General criteria: The assessment of the quality of research will be based upon the panel's judgement, knowledge and expertise in the subject area informed by the written submission.
International excellence: highly innovative work which provides significant new understanding and has changed or is likely to change or modify existing theories or experimental practice.

LAW

General criteria: [The Panel's] professionally informed judgement of the quality
International excellence: work can be regarded as of international excellence if it is a primary reference point in its field (in the sense that it is, or in the opinion of the Panel is likely to be, recognised as amongst the best in its field.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
General criteria: (a) Originality: intellectual advance or significant contribution to knowledge, interpretation and understanding; (b) Intellectual and methodological rigour and coherence; analytical and interpretative insight; (c) Imaginative scope and quality; (d) Importance of issues addressed; extent of implications for other researchers; (e) Accuracy and depth of scholarship.
International excellence: the Panel will judge submissions against the best work being done in the relevant fields internationally.

CLINICAL LABORATORY SCIENCES
General criteria: including the originality, scientific rigour, potential and actual implementation and impact in health care, contribution to knowledge and conceptual frameworks of the field.
International excellence: on a par with the best work in its area anywhere in the world. The Panel normally expects output of this standard to be known by non-UK based experts and acknowledged as a contribution to the field of knowledge.

PSYCHOLOGY
General criteria: the Panel will seek to establish whether the research reported is competent, appropriately innovative, and makes a contribution to psychological knowledge, theory or practice.
International excellence: at least of a quality which is comparable with work at the forefront of UK national work on the topic, competitive with the best work internationally, and making a significant or substantial contribution to psychological knowledge, theory of practice.

EDUCATION
General criteria: the quality of publications and other forms of public research output
International excellence: research that is as good as the leading research in those countries where there is a significant body of work in the field. The research would make a significant contribution to the field and might be expected to display at least some of the following: substantial knowledge of developments in theory and practice internationally, significant empirical findings, conceptual contributions, innovative methodologies or techniques, theoretical developments or contributions to innovative developments in policy and practice.

GENERAL ENGINEERING AND MINERAL AND MINING ENGINEERING
General criteria: the extent to which the research contributes to the advancement of knowledge or understanding, innovation, analytical techniques and products and processes, including design, production and management … The Panel will also consider the novelty and originality of research outputs.
International excellence: work that will be widely regarded as making an appreciable contribution to the knowledge base within the field, and will influence, or have the potential to influence, the global research and/or the practitioner communities. Such work will help set the international research agenda in the field, or contribute significantly to its development, through, inter alia, leadership, impact, publication and/or collaboration

ANTHROPOLOGY
General criteria: The Panel will judge the degree and kind of impact that the work has had or, in the case of recently published work, is likely to have
International excellence: characteristic of research output which, by way of the

presentation of new empirical material, discoveries or substantive findings, or through the generation of novel conceptual or theoretical syntheses, or by the pioneering of innovative research agendas and directions, has become, or is likely to become, a primary point of reference in its sub-field. Such research is at a level that is at, or very close to, the highest level of excellence and impact that is achievable in this sub-field.

SOCIOLOGY

General criteria: (a) The intellectual significance and/or innovative character of research activity (This will be the most highly valued: the order of the others is not one of rank). (b) The extent to which the research activity sets the intellectual or policy agenda at a UK and/or international level; (c) The extent to which the research activity is generally recognised as being of high quality in and beyond the subject community; (d) The rigour of procedures employed by parties external to the institution in assessing the quality of research activity. (e) The role of competition and of peer review involved in securing input to or output from research activity. (f) The research activity that is achieved given the particular inputs, taking account of the field and methods of enquiry. (g) The scale, range, and significance of research inputs and outputs. (h) The degree to which the research activities in the submission have promoted the discipline, raised its profile amongst other disciplines, developed interdisciplinary research, and disseminated research, including in the media, where appropriate. (i) The degree to which ongoing relationships with user communities have been successfully established. (j) The degree to which new audiences have been generated by the research activity in the unit of assessment.

International excellence: (a) Agenda setting - the degree to which research activities have set, or may set, international agendas; (b) Effects beyond the specialism - the degree to which research activities have impacted, or may impact, upon international sociological debate beyond the specific sub-area of research; (c) Impact on leading specialist academic communities: the degree to which research activities have made significant impacts within the countries or geographical areas which lead in particular sociological specialisms.

Aggrieved academic: Is a 5, 5* or for that matter a 3a, in subject X comparable with the same grade in subject Y?

Socrates: Why do you want to know?

Agg Acad: Well, if they are not comparable then the funding of research on the basis of RAE assessments is unfair.

Socrates: It is easy to ask questions, less easy to ensure that they have meaning. Are you sure that your question is capable of being answered?

Agg Acad: Well it must be - but (sotto voce) what - if - it - can't?

Socrates: Then, as you said, the funding basis is challenged.

Agg Acad: But who dares challenge the spending of £1000m?

Socrates: Enough of these questions. Who will drink the hemlock?

APPENDIX TWO LETTER TO SECRETARY OF STATE

BERA, Commercial House, King Street, Southwell, Notts NG25 0EH
6 November 2002

Mr Charles Clarke MP
Secretary of State for Education and Skills
DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

Dear Mr Clarke

In welcoming your return to Education the British Educational Research Association (BERA) wants to put an item on your agenda. Unlike some of the other problems being put to you, this one can be simply resolved by joining-up the thinking of two of the major agencies in your domain.

When you were Schools Standards Minister one of your responsibilities was for educational research. You told us that it was a low priority but, nevertheless, an outcome of BERA meeting with you was the funding of DfES fellowships for teachers to gain research doctorates. Other forms of government support for teacher research have been the Best Practice Research Scholarships, the Network of Learning Communities, and the website Teachernet - research. It is gratifying to see that the just-published OECD report says that 'the quantity and quality of attention being paid to educational R and D by the [English] government and to its potential contribution to the quality of policy and practice are remarkable'.

Part of this excellence is encompassed in the idea that teaching should be a research-based profession. The problem to put to you is that this essential concept is in grave danger: the solution is to get the Teacher Training Agency and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, to talk to each other and join-up their thinking.

If teaching is to be research-based then teacher-training must be research-based. Until 1992 most academic educational research in England was carried out in the schools of education of 23 of the 'old' universities, but over the last ten years nearly every initial teacher training institution has developed a research profile and 62 of them entered for the last Research Assessment Exercise. But it takes a long time to develop a high level research culture and only one of the 'new entrants', Manchester Metropolitan University, got as high as a '4' rating.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (with responsibility for all academic disciplines) has decided that only departments rated 3A and above should be eligible for funding. This means that the 23 ITT institutions who achieved less get no financial support for research. (18 scored '3B', 5 scored '2' and, significantly, none hit the bottom of the scale). HEFCE has now also decided that such departments should get no public funding for post-graduate students, although over 400 students, mainly part-time, are currently registered for research degrees at these institutions. The consequence of these decisions by HEFCE is likely to be that the slowly growing research culture of these institutions, amounting to about a third of those currently training teachers, will be destroyed.

Accepting that HEFCE cannot easily make exceptions for Education as one of its 69 disciplines, there is a strong case for the Teacher Training Agency stepping in and funding these departments so that their research culture can continue to grow.

The rationale is simple: every child in the country deserves to be taught by teachers whose practice is evidence-based and in schools permeated with a research culture. Of the various ways of trying to achieve this the most important is that the training of teachers itself is research-based. In turn this requires the teacher trainers to have a stake in research. And this requires funding. To support the '3B' and '2' rated ITT departments at the same level as the '3A' rated departments would annually cost less than £1.5 million. It is a small price for a big idea.

Please can you get the Teacher Training Agency and the Higher Education Funding Council to join-up their thinking! I will send copies of this letter to the chief executives of both agencies.

Yours sincerely

Michael Bassey, Academic Secretary, British Educational Research Association