

## **Re: Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment – Invitation to Contribute**

I am writing on behalf of the British Psychological Society, the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments and the Experimental Psychology Society (the three main bodies that represent Psychology in the UK), in my capacity as Chair of the Joint Committee for Resources in Higher Education.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the review and recognise that beneficial changes could be introduced for a future RAE. In the past, RAEs have been used to measure research “quality” and productivity, with the purpose of selectively allocating research funds to HE institutions on the basis of grades awarded to UoAs returned by institutions. As a discipline, Psychology improved its position quite considerably in terms of grades awarded; however, the pressure to distribute funds selectively, coupled with a failure to increase funding to meet the general increase in research quality achieved within the University sector, has meant that improved quality has not necessarily been rewarded through increased research funding. Moreover, there is a concern that research activity in less favoured institutions and/ or departments may suffer, to the detriment of Psychology as a whole.

### **Comments on the Discussion Groups:**

#### **Group 1 – Expert Review**

- 1.1 We are strongly in favour of maintaining a form of expert review. We believe that it remains the best means of assessing research quality. We feel that the Psychology RAE Panel's assessments were generally fair and the alternatives presented in the consultation document are inferior.
- 1.2 We believe that due account must be taken of “capacity-building” and training of researchers, as an important element in judging research quality and contribution. The importance of the HE sector in producing world-class research is not in question; a future RAE must be part of a mechanism for recognising, rewarding and facilitating the training of researchers for the UK if its current scientific eminence is to be retained and even enhanced.
- 1.3 However, we feel that combining teaching and research assessment is likely to be unwieldy in practice since the workload would be very high and concentrated for all involved. Credible judges of teaching quality may not necessarily be good assessors of research quality and vice versa. We would therefore not recommend merging the two exercises.
- 1.4 We are concerned in relation to the treatment of inter-disciplinary research under the expert review system, and how such work can be adequately assessed without

sufficient breadth of representation on the Panels. Such breadth of representation is also important to ensure that blue-sky research or newly developing areas can also be assessed on an equal par with more established topic areas within the discipline. Whilst it is acknowledged that under the 2001 Exercise, cross-Panel consultation was undertaken if requested by the individual researcher, it was felt that this process could be made clearer and more transparent. Moreover, we note and are concerned about the contradiction that exists between the Research Councils' current thrust to encourage multi-disciplinary research and the RAE's single discipline-based Units of Assessment

## **Group 2 – Algorithm**

- 2.1 We reject the use of an algorithmic approach as the exclusive type of research assessment.
- 2.2 The quantitative metrics available do not encapsulate the totality of research excellence and a reliance on them is likely to see the metrics become less reliable over time. It is anticipated that there will be undesirable changes to academics' citation and refereeing practices and that departments might engage in public relations exercises to artificially increase their visibility among "reputation" survey respondents.
- 2.3 Such measures have their flaws - which are well known. They may be used as sources of information within an expert review system, but should not be employed to replace expert review. Moreover, the notion that such metrics are totally 'objective' is clearly a fallacy, as virtually all metrics are subject to different interpretations.

## **Group 3 – Self-Assessment**

- 3.1 We reject the notion of research assessment entirely or principally in terms of self-assessment. Nevertheless, we recognise that "self-assessment" could play some part in the future exercise, and be considered by the expert review panel.
- 3.2 It was suggested that as the current method fails to capture some critical and relevant staff research activities, one possible use of self-assessment would be for individual statements to be submitted by staff to bring such important information to bear and to make the process more transparent.  
It was also felt that the provision of such a statement would allow for the recognition of achievements of researchers at different stages of their research career.  
Such a statement could contain reference to measures of international recognition (such as invited keynote addresses at international conferences, focus on their work at international symposia etc.) Researchers could also be invited to give an assessment

of the theoretical or practical impact of their work. Such a statement could then be evaluated by the Panel (along with the four best publications) in the normal way.

- 3.3 Some concern was expressed that such self-assessment may, however, put too much emphasis on skilled assessment writing. It could lead to academics spending large amounts of time trying to second-guess what would be impressive and large numbers of academics would have to be trained to apply the criteria accurately. Departments that were not validated but were widely thought to have made extravagant claims would be unable to defend themselves against these allegations. Institutional risk-taking propensity may therefore become a factor in the ratings.

#### **Group 4 – Historical Ratings**

- 4.1 We reject the proposal to pursue a policy that would give each institution a rating solely on the basis of its historical performance. Such a measure could only be used in conjunction with another method; and inevitably will be used within the context of expert review.
- 4.2 We feel that the rate of infrastructure change could increase rapidly, provided that adequate resources were made available. Encouraging institutions to compete for funds to support the infrastructure was seen as a positive strategy, to encourage greater focus on capacity building within developing departments.

#### **Group 5 – Cross Cutting Themes**

##### **a) Assessment of the Research Base:**

1. We are concerned that funds may become concentrated amongst established centres of excellence, to the detriment of developing departments.

Future RAEs could rate separate components of the department's activities (such as postgraduate training; research output etc.) and separate allocations could be made for each component.

2. We judge that the current system of assessment does not allow for variation in excellence. It is important to ensure that the assessment ensures the maximum amount of potential for the maximum amount of researchers to undertake research (again, this point refers to the importance of capacity building).

3. In the absence of better measures, we believe that peer reviewed publication output should remain the primary basis for assessment. Other criteria such as research that changes public policy and/ or research that changes real-world practice (outside of academe) should be considered of value. Similarly, research that generates a paradigm shift within a discipline or that de-bunks an existing established view is

valuable – though may take some time to manifest itself.

4. We would also welcome a more explicit statement that work of a confidential or sensitive nature (for commercial or defence organisations for example) can be submitted.

5. Finally, assuming a continuation of expert review, it is desirable that the Panels make use of what quantitative measures are available. If the Panels consider PhD completions, they should not put too much weight on the funding source. If Universities are generating their own PhD Studentships, then this is a good use of the RAE funds they receive. If too much weight is given to Studentships from the Research Councils, this will effectively double count the Research Council income. It also needs to be made clear in the guidelines / criteria how clinical psychology doctorates will be treated, in terms of which ones will be eligible for inclusion and which will not.

**b) Frequency:**

1. We agree that the current cycle of Exercises is appropriate and that all disciplines should be assessed as part of the same Exercise.
2. Assuming that clear criteria are produced the current cycle allows departments time to plan and have some chance that these plans will come to fruition.

**c) Excellence in Research:**

We feel that “excellence” should refer to intellectual excellence, as well as knowledge transfer (communication and application) and the development of future researchers. Specifically, concern was expressed that the importance of knowledge transfer was being undermined by an increasing focus on the role of enterprise.

**d) Proportion of Available Funding:**

We reject the proposal to utilise research assessment to determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject.

**e) Uniform Institutional Assessments:**

We recommend that all institutions should be assessed in accordance with the same procedure and criteria.

**f) Uniform Subject Assessment:**

1. We strongly recommend that all subjects should be assessed in accordance with the same procedure and criteria. However, it was acknowledged that subject specific criteria are essential in order to take into account unique characteristics of different disciplines.
2. We are concerned that psychology researchers in non-typical Psychology departments may be disadvantaged due to the multidisciplinary nature of their work. We would strongly encourage a future RAE to have provisions for specialist Panels, sympathetic to the specific problems of researchers in multidisciplinary groups, to be created.

**g) Discretion to Institutions:**

We are concerned that some institutions are better than others at “playing the game” to secure a high rating in the Exercise.

**h) Equality of Treatment:**

1. We recommend that in order to develop an assessment system that is resistant to playing the system, all staff should be submitted for future exercises. This would attempt to avoid the strategic manoeuvring in previous exercises to select a subset of staff to attain a higher overall grading. The motivation for the strategy was the step change in funding associated with each rating band.
2. A second method that could be used to avoid this would be to grade the categories in a way that makes the boundaries less critical. For example, rather than having a five point system, each of the current categories could be subdivided into three, making a 15 point scale. The research funding in each department could then be calculated by its ranking on the 15 point scale, multiplied by the number of staff submitted, multiplied by the basic funding unit for the subject. This procedure would produce a better measure of the true differences in ranking leading to a fairer apportioning of research funds.
3. Formal allowances for stage of careers and career breaks need to be adopted so as to avoid undesirable cycles in the jobs market. It is almost impossible for a very bright researcher just out of a PhD to have achieved 4 publications of international excellence and as a result such people can become unattractive investments close to RAE submission dates. Historically, this has led, in some instances, to departments adopting policies of only employing people who are already “returnable”. This is undesirable not only for the bright new postdoctoral researcher, but also for the departments that may wish to invest in young people with potential. Whilst it is acknowledged that there was some recognition of this problem in the 2001 RAE, there was considerable variation between panels in the handling of new researchers. We would welcome clear statements, early in the process, as to how young staff are to be treated.
4. Recognition also needs to be given to some areas of the discipline (e.g. clinical psychology where academics (whilst appearing as full-time category A staff) are required to engage in clinical work for a set number of sessions per week, reducing the time available for research.
5. We would also encourage future assessment Panels to judge “value for money” in their assessments. Departments that have vast resources ought to be able to produce excellent research, so in turn, those with limited resources producing the same high quality work, should have this efficiency recognised and differentially rewarded.

**i) Priorities:**

We believe that any assessment system should strive to be fair, transparent, informative and resistant to game playing.

Finally, whilst we recognise that the issues of resource distribution are essentially political decisions and outside of the remit of the invitation to comment, we strongly feel that it is crucial that the outcome of the assessment exercise is fully funded. If it is not, many of the benefits that arise from the fairly substantial costs of running it will be severely undermined. Its credibility was deeply threatened after the 2001 RAE as a result of the failure to provide full funding for the outcome.

Yours sincerely

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***Chair, Joint Committee for Resources in Higher Education***