

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Clarification of details of the report

Since the publication of the Review of Research Assessment, I have tried to make a note of those areas of the report which stakeholders have found unclear. I have attempted to address most of the most common queries, recognising that there are some instances where it is not possible to offer clarification- for example, to give the census date for the next exercise at this stage.

These notes were presented at a meeting of the Foundation for Science and Technology at the Royal Society on 16 July 2003. I should make it clear that they reflect my own view of how the review proposals might be implemented. The funding councils will not make any comment until the consultation responses have been received and analysed.

Sir Gareth Roberts

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. THE REPORT PROPOSES A HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF SUB-PANELS, MAIN PANELS AND SUPER-PANELS. WHAT WILL ALL OF THESE PANELS ACTUALLY DO?

Institutions will be allowed to submit to any of the 60 or so sub-units of assessment. The **sub-panels** will therefore be equivalent to the existing RAE panels. They will be responsible for the assessment task and will produce a quality profile for each submission. The ultimate responsibility for decisions on the quality of research should rest with the super-panels following the advice of the main panels. However, the judgements of the sub-panels would carry considerable weight, especially in relation to the detailed scoring of submissions.

The **main panels** will have a brief to ensure consistency across a number of sub panels. They will not undertake detailed scrutiny of research outputs except where they have concerns about judgements made by a sub-panel. Their main tasks will be: to sign off the criteria statements of the sub-panels sitting underneath them; to confirm that the sub-panels have graded in a way which is consistent with their own criteria and to consider whether to make a case to the **super panel** to allow one or more of their sub-panels to award either more stars or fewer stars than the norm. Super panels will have only one task: to consider such requests from main panels and to rule on them.

2. WHO WILL SIT ON THE PANELS?

The sub-panels will consist of a team of expert reviewers similar to RAE2001 panels. Each of the sub-panels sitting under a main panel will also be attended by the same person: a moderator whose role is to help to ensure consistency.

Each main panel will consist of the chairs of the 4 or so sub-panels sitting underneath them and the moderator for the unit of assessment. Each main panel will also be attended by the senior moderator responsible for the super-unit of assessment making a total of around 6 people on each panel.

The super panel will consist of the moderators and the panel chairs of the 4 or 5 main panels sitting underneath it and the senior moderator for the super unit of assessment. If a Chair of the exercise is appointed (s)he will chair all the super panels. If not, they will be chaired by the senior moderator. There will, therefore, be around 10-12 people on each super-panel.

3. HOW WILL THE RAE ASSESS APPLICABLE RESEARCH?

The review team has made clear our view that assessments should be made against criteria which reflect the characteristics of excellence in applied research and research linked to professional practice as well as basic research (the implication is that those characteristics may not be the same in each case).

I am aware that outputs other than academic publications were accepted in RAE2001, especially in the creative arts. Museum exhibitions and prepared reports for industry also featured. It is, important to recognise that in areas such as clinical medicine and social science, impact on professional practice can be as important as the impact of publications upon academic peers.

I can envisage that in some cases a report from a researcher or group outlining the research and the impact it has had might be supported by testimonials from partners in practice. This however, is a level of detail beyond what is in the report; it will be for the funding councils and their agents to take final decisions on operational matters.

4. HOW WOULD THE RESEARCH CAPACITY ASSESSMENT WORK IN DISCIPLINES WHERE THERE WAS NO CONFIDENCE IN METRICS?

The Research Capacity Assessment is a threshold assessment of the work across a department. It will measure engagement with research rather than world-class excellence. If a department can demonstrate a level of engagement with research which suggests that it undertakes a respectable quantity of research which is taken seriously by other researchers, as measured by metrics, it will meet the threshold. The assessment will be at the level of the sub-unit.

We could not run a metrics based assessment in disciplines where the best available advice was that the available metrics were insufficiently reliable for even that limited task.

In the report (paragraph 150) we outline two ways in which the funding councils could address this. They could fund all those departments not submitted to the 'full' Research Quality Assessment in the affected subjects on the basis of an appropriate headcount, thereby dispensing with the need for a Research Capacity Assessment; or they could encourage all departments in those disciplines to submit to the Research Quality Assessment by offering some limited reward for work not of the very highest calibre. This second solution, however, would tend to increase panel workload in the very subjects where the assessment task tends to be the most onerous.

5. WHY DO YOU NOT WANT THE RAE TO SCORE INDIVIDUALS?

We are clear in the report that the RAE is not an instrument for assessing individuals. It is for institutions to undertake performance reviews of their staff and we do not believe that the RAE could or should be adapted for this purpose. There are two reasons for this. In 2001 this would have meant that the RAE would have had to make 50,000 defensible judgements rather than 2,500. Secondly, as we note in the report, if individuals were to be judged, fairness demands that they would have to have control over whether they were submitted and what was submitted in their name. We do not think it is practicable to run a peer review exercise on the scale that would be required were these things to happen.

6. HOW WILL YOU PREVENT INDIVIDUAL SCORES BECOMING KNOWN?

The report does not propose that panels score individuals in order to produce the quality profile. A panel will have to determine the proportion of research submitted which could be described as 1* 2* or 3* and multiply each proportion by the number of staff submitted. The same was true in RAE2001: panels were asked to ascertain the proportion of research activity at international and national level (they were then asked to turn these assessments into grades with the help of published grade descriptors).

The procedure does not require it to generate a score for each individual; nor does it presume that each output is of equal weight (as the panel could, for example, give greater weight to a monograph than a short paper). Moreover, we have encouraged group submissions where this is appropriate.

It is arguable that, where a submission is of a very small size and there is a risk that individuals could be identified from the profile, the profile for the sub-unit of assessment should not be published. In these cases a profile could be published covering the entire unit of assessment to prevent the identification of individuals.

7. WHY HAVE YOU RECOMMENDED THAT PANELS BE GIVEN GUIDELINES ON THE EXPECTED PROPORTION OF THREE, TWO, ONE AND ZERO STAR RATINGS?

Several of the elements of assessment bearing on consistency, especially across cognate areas and in the calibration of the quality ratings against international standards of excellence, attracted critical comments from RAE2001 panel chairs. In the absence of evidence that certain subjects outperform or underperform others, academics were puzzled at the significant variation in grade distribution across similar disciplines.

What is more, in funding terms, it is relative performance rather than absolute performance which matters. With limited funds available a department or institution which fails to keep pace with its peers will inevitably suffer in funding terms, even if its ratings do not decline in absolute terms.

Therefore we are proposing a norm-referencing approach under which panels would start from the position that they were to award a given distribution of star ratings. This falls a long way short of imposing a distribution on each panel. Departures would be justified by panels and approved by the moderation process where there was convincing evidence that a subject's research performance was exceptional when compared to international benchmarks. Great care would need to be exercised in small subjects or those where there was little tradition of research.

8. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGY STATEMENTS IN THE COMPETENCES ASSESSMENT AND IN THE MAIN RQA? WHY DO THIS TWICE?

The 'research strategy' element of the competences assessment will ask the institution to identify its research priorities and its key relationships with research partners, how those links would be developed etc.

The unit-level strategies seen by the panels would be checked for their consistency with the institutional strategy. This is to ensure that no institution can have 60 'top priorities'. Unlike the old 'RA5 form', it will not contain details of staff development arrangements and staffing policy (as these will be dealt with in the competence assessment). It will, however, give the institution an opportunity to highlight cases where its research has had an impact on practice within and beyond HE where it feels the panel will find this is difficult to establish from the research output submitted. It will also, as before, enable an academic department to highlight features which underpin its success and its ability to sustain its performance.

Unit-level strategies would be submitted at the same time as the RQA submission. They would not influence RQA quality profiles, although panels would be able to comment on strategies which they felt were particularly strong or weak. It would be for the funding councils to decide whether to act on, or publish these comments.

9. WHAT FURTHER GUIDANCE WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE RUN-UP TO THE NEXT RAE AND WHEN?

The consultation period finishes on 30 September 2003. Each of the Funding Councils will decide their responses by the end of this calendar year. My hope is that the four Funding Councils will continue to act in a concerted fashion and that they will authorise a team to move briskly to produce a specific timetable for the next research assessment exercise. As on previous occasions there will be extensive consultation on matters such as units of assessment and their working methods and assessment criteria.

In RAE 2001 the generic rules for the exercise (the 'Guidance on Submissions') were published two years before the submission date whilst the panel criteria and working methods were issued 15 months before the submission date, having previously been the subject of a consultation. If

the RAE were to be held in 2007, I would expect the equivalent documents to be produced to a similar timetable.