

Summary of responses to the *Joint consultation on the review of research assessment (May 2003/22)*

1. Following the consultation on the review of research assessment, the funding bodies produced a working summary of the views expressed by respondents. That summary is reproduced in full below.

Key consultation findings

2. The key findings of the consultation are as follows:
- a. There is majority support for most proposals but this support is very heavily qualified.
 - b. Expert peer review is felt to be fundamental to the assessment of research quality and an appropriate tool for informing funding.
 - c. There is an acceptance that a discipline-based peer review process will inevitably create burden for institutions but strong resistance to elements which are held to be peripheral to such an assessment.
 - d. The proposed panel structure is perceived as being unnecessarily elaborate.
 - e. While an increased focus on discipline specificities is welcomed, the sector acknowledges limits to the extent to which RAE grades can be comparable across disciplines.
 - f. The development and use of discipline specific metrics is supported provided it does not take the place of or unduly influence the judgement of experts.
 - g. There is resistance to additional levels of assessment leading up to the main assessment.
 - h. While the multi-track model is supported in principle this support is heavily qualified.
 - i. The move to a profile system is generally approved although there is concern about the potential grading of individuals
 - j. Current levels of uncertainty over the nature of the next assessment are a cause for unease within the sector. Clarification of the key features of the next assessment process is now requested urgently.

The consultation

3. The report of the Review of Research Assessment was published on 30 May 2003 alongside a consultation issued by the funding councils. Of the 15 questions in the consultation, 10 were based upon recommendations of the review. The other 5 asked respondents to comment more broadly on the review proposals.

4. The consultation closed on 30 September 2003. This paper sets out our initial analysis of the responses.

Methodology

5. Respondents to the consultation were asked to rate the acceptability of each of 34 propositions on a five point scale¹. They were also invited to make more detailed comments on each of the 15 consultation questions (which sought views on linked groups of propositions).

6. We have quantified levels of support for each proposition and have used these figures to validate our analysis of textual comments. It should be noted, however that respondents represent a self-selecting sample of a population whose membership has never been clearly defined (the stakeholders of the UK research assessment process). Furthermore, respondents cannot be assumed to be of equal weight- it is reasonable to suppose that the corporate response of an institution reflects the considered view of more people than the private response of an individual. For these reasons we are obliged to be cautious in using the quantitative data as a definitive indicator of stakeholders' views.

7. We have also noted that, in general, respondents are more critical in their textual commentaries than in their answers to the closed questions. We can only speculate as to the reasons for this phenomenon. In the interests of caution we recommend that the committee should not necessarily treat small majorities as indicative of consent for major reforms.

Breakdown of statistical information

8. 34 items offered for comment

- Strong agreement for 13 items (70% or more of responses agree or strongly agree)
- Agreement for 8 items (50-69% agree or strongly agree)
- Limited agreement for 10 items (30-49% agree or strongly agree)
- Very limited agreement for 3 items (less than 30% agree or strongly agree)

9. Overall 21 of the 34 items offered for comment elicited agreement from 50% or more of respondents.

¹ In one case a three point scale

Analysis of Textual Commentary

Recommendation 1 Peer Review informed by Performance Indicators (95% Agree)

10. The majority of respondents agree that expert peer review must be “*fundamental to any effective system of research assessment.*” (University of Oxford) However, many also noted that the use of performance indicators is less straightforward and their role in the peer review process is challenged. (See recommendation 8 below for more on this issue.)

Recommendation 2 Timeframe

2a	6 year cycle	86% Agree
2b	mid-point monitoring	46%
2c	next assessment in 2007	56%

11. The majority of respondents are in favour of the proposed 6 year cycle. However, concern was expressed by many as to the timing of the next assessment which was felt to be too soon and which would not allow institutions adequate time to adapt to some of the more fundamental changes proposed.

12. There is limited support for the proposed mid-point monitoring, the function of which has been questioned. In addition to the view expressed that the timescale is too tight for this to occur in time for the next assessment round, respondents note that the proposed ‘light touch’ approach may, in practice, involve considerable work for institutions.

Recommendation 3 Research competences

3a	Assessment 2 years prior to main assessment	47% agree
3b	A list of competencies to be addressed	52%
3c	Failure to impact on funding	43%

13. There is little support for the proposed assessment of research competences. Several respondents have noted that the proposed elements of the assessment (research strategy, development of researchers, equal opportunities and dissemination) whilst desirable are not necessary components of research excellence.

14. While support for the proposal was expressed, even some of those in favour could sound less than enthusiastic “*an institution-level research strategy is going to be necessarily broad, and we think not particularly meaningful.*” (University of Edinburgh)

Multi-track assessment (recommendation 4)

4a	Multi-track assessment	58% Agree
4b	Separate route for least research intensive	37%
4c	Form of above a matter for Funding Councils	28%
4d	Less competitive work elsewhere to be assessed by proxy	35%

4e Most competitive to be assessed through old RAE style process 71%

15. There is resistance to the notion of multi-track assessment and strong resistance to the establishment of a separate assessment route for the least research intensive institutions. The argument is that:

On the one hand multi-track assessment would ensure that the burden of assessment is proportional to the likely benefits. On the other hand, the prior classification of candidates pre-judges the outcome of quality assessment and goes against the principle of free competition. (Universities UK)

16. There is also significant concern amongst stakeholders regarding the proposed Research Capacity Assessment. Two concerns predominate:

- institutions would be unable to make informed choices on whether to submit work to the Research Quality Assessment or Research Capacity Assessment unless the funding weights were known in advance
- insufficient detail was provided regarding the format of the Research Capacity Assessment².

17. The proposal to assess the strongest research through a peer review process (the 'Research Quality Assessment') was uncontroversial - although concerns were raised with regard to subsequent recommendations concerning the nature of that process.

Recommendation 5 Outputs of the assessment

5a	Quality Profile	67% Agree
5b	Individuals not to be scored	76%
5c	Expected proportions of star ratings	34%

18. There was strong support for the proposed move from a grading system to a quality profile. Those opposed tended to cite the fear that individual scores would have to be disclosed under such a system. Opposition to the disclosure of individual ratings was both uniform and vehement. We can conclude that stakeholders support the profile system but that this support would not hold if they considered that it would lead to the disclosure of individual scores³.

² this concern tended to be expressed by those whose support for an RCA was conditional upon its having a peer review element. As the proposal was that it be based entirely upon proxy measures it is likely that the complaint of lack of clarity conceals a fundamental disagreement with what is proposed.

³ HEFCE's legal advice is that the profile system does not increase the risk that such scores would need to be produced in order to make assessments or the risk that they would need to be disclosed if they were. It may however increase the desire of individuals and institutions to seek such information and therefore the risk that either through leaks or through valid procedural channels such disclosure might take place.

19. There was little support for the proposal to issue guidance to panels on an expected distribution of star ratings. Sector responses repeatedly contended that:

- the RAE should be an absolute assessment of quality
- the funding councils should allocate sufficient resources to recognise all the high-quality research revealed by the exercise.

20. If an RAE is to be conducted with the consent of the community it is probably the case that the funding councils will need to accept the first of the above points, notwithstanding that it is connected to the second, which reflects an extremely optimistic analysis of the funding environment.

Recommendation 6 Panel structure

6a	20-25 Panels + 60 sub-panels	60% Agree
6b	Chairs and Moderators	80%
6c	Non-UK based advisers	71%
6d	Super-panels to ensure consistency	69%

21. There is some concern that the proposed three-level panel structure is unnecessarily elaborate. There is also a widespread desire to devolve the two key powers of panels- criteria setting and grading- to the lowest level (i.e. that of the sub-panels) as a means of ensuring that decisions are taken by competent peers. Typical responses are as follows:

Although the proposed revised panel structure is more elaborate and threatens to be considerably more resource-intensive, we agree that it should be conducive to increased consistency in the judgements of panels. (UCL)

We support the objective of ensuring consistency between panels. However, the proposed three tier structure is unnecessarily cumbersome. Peer assessment will take place at sub-panel level and there should be only one layer above this to ensure consistency. (1994 Group)

22. There is also a degree of scepticism regarding the ability of a tiered panel structure to deliver grades which are meaningfully comparable.

We fully support the plans for moderation between panels. However, there is the risk of dilution of peer and subject specialist review, particularly as one gets to the 'super-panel' level, and these would need to be worked out very carefully (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy)

23. Respondents have observed repeatedly that the notions of consistency and comparability across disciplines would appear to be at odds with the principle of expert review.

24. Taken together with the response to question 5 it appears that, while there is concern about inconsistent grading, there is no consensus in favour of individual measures designed to prevent it.

25. While the recommendation that non-UK based researchers be included in panel composition is supported in principle, the concern has been expressed that the value of their contribution may be very limited if their experience of the UK research is limited. It has also been noted that international benchmarking may not be appropriate or necessary in all disciplines.

Recommendation 7 Outputs

7a	Abolition of 4 outputs rule	53% Agree
7b	Treatment of applicable and practice-based research	94%

26. There is relatively little opposition to the recommendation that limits on the number of publications submitted might vary between panels. There is, however, a widely articulated belief that publication limits should be announced before the start of the assessment period. This reflects the desire of the sector to plan and conduct its research activity with the next assessment in mind. Furthermore, there is concern that any increase in the number of outputs submitted could lead to an unwelcome emphasis on quantity over quality.

27. Respondents strongly endorse the proposition that panel criteria should enable assessors to recognise the best examples of applicable and practice based research.

Recommendation 8 Development and use of discipline specific metrics

8a	Collaborative development of performance indicators	74% Agree
8b	Performance calculated 1 year in advance of main event	49%
8c	Variation between panels	75%

28. There is strong support for the development of discipline specific metrics by the subject communities in consultation with HEIs. However, respondents are adamant that the use of metrics should not replace expert peer review, even in the case of less research intensive institutions. It was also noted that *“there is a notable risk of panel assessments being distorted by public debate of institutional performance rankings at this early stage”* (University of Manchester and UMIST).

Recommendation 9 Rules governing submissions

9a	Exclusivity of RCA and RQA routes	54% Agree
9b	Consideration of group outputs	80%
9c	Enabling joint submissions	88%
9d	80% of staff submissions	39%
9e	Eligibility as for Research Councils	71%

29. There was general support for the aspiration to enable and promote group submissions and joint submissions though some respondents reserved judgement on the proposals citing lack of detail.

30. There was little support for the proposal that a minimum of 80% of eligible staff should be submitted to each RQA sub-unit. Respondents pointed out the difficulty in defining the eligible population and the risks of pressuring teaching staff to focus on research in department where such staff constituted more than 20% of academic staff. Many institutions commented that their response would be to remove references to research from staff contracts and highlighted the potential impact upon morale.

31. Doubts were expressed over the equity and practicability of using differing research council eligibility rules to determine which research assistants were eligible for assessment.

Question 10 Institutional Research Strategy (73% Agree)

32. Support has been relatively strong the submission of institutional research strategies, although many respondents have suggested these be considered at sub-panel, rather than (intermediate) panel level. Reservations have been expressed as to the value of these strategy documents in the context of a research assessment, as they do not reflect research quality in any way, and may limit institutions' ability to respond proactively to unforeseen opportunities for development.

33. Several respondents observed that *"it is not clear how this document would relate to the institutional review under Recommendation 3"* (University of Leicester).

Question 11 Burden for Institutions proportionate to reward (24% Agree)

34. Respondents have been reluctant to provide a direct answer to the question posed given that the ratio of burden to funding is not yet clear. The consensus is that the proposed structure will be no less burdensome than that of RAE2001, particularly for the more research intensive institutions (following the proposed RQA route) who would be required to implement a number of new structures prior to the next round of assessment.

35. The timing of the assessment was also a concern:

The proposed combination of (1) RCA/RQA, (2) 'mid-point monitoring', (3) institution-level assessment of research competences and (4) calculation of performance against indicators a year prior to the main exercised seems to verge on a process of continuous research assessment. (UCL)

We are now to have a six-year cycle, a 'light-touch' assessment three years into the cycle, and a competence assessment one year after that. RAE-related activity is evidently to become a well-nigh continuous presence in university affairs. [...] We would look for serious efforts to co-ordinate the activities of the various bodies whilst

*avoiding duplication of information-gathering and other administrative demands.
(University of Hull)*

Question 12 Importance is placed on research assessment where financial reward is small
(34% High)

36. The report argues that the principal purpose of research assessment is to inform funding. This view is not generally accepted by respondents, who believe that research assessment is of high value even where it does not attract significant funding to an institution.

37. Many respondents, however, articulate the conviction that assessment 'must' be backed up with funding. This suggests that the response is indicative of strong feelings in the sector around research funding and may not tell us very much about the value of assessment *per se*. Respondents have argued that: *"The RAE, along with other external evaluations of quality is a significant factor in staff morale and self-esteem. Even comparatively modest amounts of RAE funding are crucial to sustaining and enhancing high quality research."* (Kingston University) *"Peer assessment is invaluable and would be welcomed, probably almost without undue regard to the level of financial reward. Again however, account must be taken of the significant administrative burden, and of the cost."* (University of Cambridge)

38. The RAE depends upon the consent of the sector. If any single large institution attempted to undermine the process as a matter of policy or if a large number of individuals did the same it is unlikely that the process could survive (imagine legal challenges to the work of 20 panels). If the sector was unable to unite to defend the integrity of the results it is unlikely that government would be prepared to use them as a basis for funding. Similarly if it became impossible to recruit or retain panel members or if panels failed to agree ratings the process would collapse.

39. The funding councils will need to consider, in the light of these findings, whether any research assessment process which is not backed by sufficient funds to meet the sector's expectations is likely to be viable. This must be a matter of grave concern given that there is a great distance between the consensus within the sector (that research activity should expand as emerging universities seek to establish themselves in research and the leading institutions compete internationally) and the analysis shared by the policy community (that current levels of activity are unsustainable without a step change in the resources available for research which is unlikely to materialise).

Question 13 Success of review in promoting equality of opportunity (11% Successful)

40. The majority of respondents feel that the proposed structure is not successful in the promotion of equality of opportunity. Concern has been expressed that the possible requirement to submit an increased number of outputs, the proposed 80% of staff

submission and the potential assessment of individuals would disadvantage young researchers and researchers who take career breaks, particularly women.

41. It is also felt that the possible broadening of the division between teaching and research which has been felt to inform some of the proposals would have a negative impact on equality of opportunities for minority researchers.

Question 14 Overall approach of the review and 15 Additional Comments

42. Approximately two fifths of the respondents expressed approval of the general approach of the review.

43. The following review elements are warmly welcomed:

- Maintaining expert peer review
- 6-year cycle of assessment
- Undertaking to simplify and streamline assessment
- Move towards a profile rating structure
- Increased emphasis on equality of opportunities
- Increased emphasis on discipline specificity
- Provision for joint or group submissions

44. Recurrent concerns include the following:

- No overall reduction perceived in the burden of assessment on institutions
- Perceived increase in cost to institutions and increase in time commitment
- Lack of information regarding funding implications
- Unwieldy/ill-defined panel hierarchy
- Potential divisiveness of multi-track structure

45. Overall, while many of the recommendations are accepted in principle, and while responses from institutions, subject associations, key stakeholders and individuals applaud the intentions informing the review, there is strong resistance to the wholesale implementation of the proposals. Many respondents echo the view that *“all the worthwhile recommendations of the review could and should be introduced within the framework of the existing system.” (Universities UK)*