

The Royal Society's Submission to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee follow-up inquiry into the RAE

19 May 2004

The Society is grateful for this opportunity to input its views to the Committee on the latest proposals for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) published by the Funding Councils in February (HEFC2004a). We believe that the proposals are a significant step forward, but that further work needs to be done, particularly in testing out further changes that could be introduced to simplify the exercise after 2008. It is the Society's view that measures must be taken to reduce the administrative load that currently burdens academics.

The Society has published a number of documents on the development of university research policy since the start of 2002. These include an input to the Committee on its previous consideration of the RAE (RS2002a), input to the Roberts Review of the RAE (RS2002b) and to the subsequent consultation on the Roberts proposals (Roberts 2003, RS 2003a). Most recently the Society published a call for a radical review of the long-term future infrastructure funding of university research (RS2003b). Other relevant publications include a response to the HE White Paper (RS2003c), and to the OST consultation on its proposals for improving the sustainability of university research (RS2003d).

We support the Funding Councils' proposal for one single assessment method for all participating HE Institutions on a six-year cycle, without the mid-term review that was proposed by Roberts. We also welcome the Councils' commitment to secure better representation on panels of people with personal experience both of conducting research and of its commercial, industrial and public service applications, and to ensuring that applied and practice-based research are not disadvantaged by the exercise, in line with statements made in the Lambert review (Lambert 2003).

The change with possibly the greatest implications in the Councils' proposals is the new four-star system to rate research quality and hence produce a profile for each assessed unit that is continuous, compared with the major discontinuities in funding levels at the various rating boundaries used in previous assessments. The Society proposed a profiling arrangement in its submission to the Roberts Review (RS2002b) and pushed for a four star rather than a three star system in its response to Roberts (RS2003a). We believe that such a system should significantly reduce the pressure on individual researchers and general university administration for two reasons:

- Each researcher adds a discrete, but small contribution to the profile, so there is less pressure on individuals and the university to ensure that the entire submission is put in as good a light as possible. Under the previous arrangements a problem with a single piece of evidence might mean the difference between grades for a whole department, with significant financial penalties.
- It is not necessary to decide which members of staff to exclude. The need to decide whom to include in the previous RAEs has caused problems, including a lack of motivation and unity in departments.

The profiling system should result in less time and effort spent on 'game-playing' since the reduction in the difference in financial rewards would not warrant it.

Since we hope that the new proposals will reduce the pressure on researchers and administrators, we were surprised that HEFCE's own impact assessment of the new proposals has assumed that the costs of the new RAE for Higher Education Institutions will be similar to that in the RAE 2001 exercise (HEFCE 2004b). On the other hand, as the assessment continues to be based on a major peer review arrangement it should be recognised that this aspect is costly not only to the funding bodies, but also to the universities, as academics constitute a large proportion of the panels.

The elimination of the step changes in funding between grades should also help to decrease the pressure on universities to employ staff that can immediately contribute to the RAE. Consequently, the claimed disadvantage previously experienced by young researchers and researchers who have taken career breaks or work part-time should be reduced, although more still needs to be done on matters surrounding career structures for these groups. The reduction in pressure on individual researcher's time should also mean that there are fewer restrictions on engaging with the local community through representation on boards of local organisations or through communicating the results of their research.

It should be noted that the new profiling system is likely to result in some 'winners' and 'losers' among departments, if the amount of money distributed by the RAE remains the same. Departments that just scraped into grades in the last RAE are likely to receive less funding, whilst departments that fell just below grade boundaries should receive more funding than in the past. It should also mean that departments currently rated 3 or 4 that contain pockets of excellence would receive more funding than in the last RAE. In the majority of universities the differences in funding should counterbalance each other and the overall funding should not change significantly. However, it will be important to model the effect of the changes on universities and especially on those universities with the strongest research portfolios.

Despite the significant improvements in the new RAE, there remain problems in a number of areas. The Funding Councils recognised that one of the main points arising from the consultation was the need for the assessment process to be designed better to recognise excellence in fields crossing traditional discipline boundaries, yet there is no mention of how the assessment of multidisciplinary work can be improved in the document on the funding bodies' initial decisions (HEFCE 2004a). The issue is briefly mentioned in the document on panel configuration and recruitment (HEFCE2004c) and the funding bodies are currently 'considering the best way forward'. Since multidisciplinary research is becoming increasingly important we await the proposals on how multidisciplinary research assessment is to be improved. Similarly, the Councils have recognised the problem of multi-institutional collaboration, and again we await their detailed proposals.

The Society believes that next RAE would be an ideal opportunity for testing other simpler mechanism(s) for quality assessment in parallel with the new scheme. As mentioned in our previous responses, it might be possible to devise a more metric based system, with the capability of devising different parameters for each discipline based on one or a few metrics, such as peer reviewed grants, access to central facilities, research income from business and Government departments and possibly bibliometrics. We recognise that these measures have different importance across the disciplines. Any such system would still require an element of peer review to agree the procedures and validate the results, but this should be significantly less burdensome than the system required for RAE 2001, or for the profiling arrangement in 2008. Experimenting with such mechanisms now would allow the results to be compared and the potential advantages and disadvantages of less burdensome and costly mechanisms to be identified. A decision on the future of the RAE post 2008 could then be based on evidence.

References

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