

**The CCUE Response to the DfES Consultation on
'Reform of higher education research assessment and funding'**

1. Which, if any, of the RAE 2008 panels might adopt a greater or wholly metrics-based approach?

Comments:

The view of the English subject community is that a metrics-based approach as it is currently conceived by the DfES document would be of limited use in the evaluation of the quality of research in arts and humanities unless it is used to inform a robust and broadly based system of expert peer review.

While we await the proposals from the AHRC/HEFCE expert group currently considering this question, our members urge great caution in any proposed move to further emphasis on quantitative means of assessment that would reduce the element of peer review currently employed by the RAE. In relation to the suggestions made in Appendix 2 of the consultation document, we would wish to make the following points:

Input metrics. There is no clear evidence that research income necessarily or accurately correlates with the best research activity in English, and a very real danger that, in according a great deal of weight to the input, the assessment of the quality of the related output will be overlooked.

It is the case that relatively little research activity in English is funded by large grants. Reliance on grant income as a major metric would thus unduly advantage those sub-fields of English (such as aspects of linguistic study and digitisation projects) that do favour heavily funded group projects, and disadvantage those (such as Creative Writing, textual analysis, literary biography or scholarly editing) that do not. Given the tendency of University managers to encourage departments to 'follow the money' this would be highly likely to shift the entire emphasis of English studies in the direction of those areas of work most conducive to large grant applications.

Given that much 'excellent' (A+) rated research is not currently funded by the AHRC, etc, owing to financial constraints, funding-based metrics will also map only loosely onto the best work in the sector.

Volume metrics. Much would depend on the relative weight attached to these. However, the data are readily available and the successful completion of PhDs (which necessarily involves peer review) is, for example, a helpful indicator, but again indicates only one aspect of work in English rather than the whole picture.

Quality/output metrics. The consultation document is vague on this point. As the recent ERIH consultation exercise indicates, journal citations are a deeply problematic means of assessing the quality of research in the humanities and no 'bibliometric indicator' exists for research monographs, a key feature of scholarly research. It is crucially important that any indicators of peer esteem or user impact developed should have the confidence of the

relevant subject communities. We are not confident that the current proposals provide this.

Research Council Evaluation in the form of 'end of award data' is only partially useful since it rests largely upon validated self-reporting by academics and does not include any peer review of the quality of the work produced. Here as more generally, it is vital for a robust element of expert peer review to be built in to the system to assess the **quality** rather than simply the **quantity** of what is being measured.

2. Have we identified all the important metrics? Bearing in mind the need to avoid increasing the overall burden of data collection on institutions, are there other indicators that we should consider?

Comments:

HESA and higher education institutions already collect a great deal of information related to research activity. As noted above, for the arts and humanities existing information about PhD registrations and completions could be utilised. More detailed information could be collected about a number of other activities which are currently described in the 'esteem' component of the RAE, for example journal editing, acting as External Examiner for PhDs and for postgraduate courses, acting as a reader for journals and publishers, etc.

However, the points made above under 1 remain central: collecting metrical data without the overarching scrutiny of expert peer review is deeply unreliable for disciplines such as English. The only way accurately to assess the quality of a monograph, for example, is for an expert in the field to read it. The same is also true of journal articles, essays, editions, etc.

3. Which of the alternative models described in this chapter do you consider to be the most suitable for STEM subjects? Are there alternative models or refinements of these models that you would want to propose?

Comments:

This question would best be addressed by representatives of the STEM subjects.

4 What, in your view, would be an appropriate and workable basis for assessing and funding research in non-STEM subjects?

Comments:

Among those working in English there is **overwhelming** support for the retention of expert peer review as the **major** element in the assessment process. While the current proposals present plausible methods for the measurement of the quantity of research and research-related activity, they do not provide the means of assessing the quality of the

outputs produced. Only a comprehensive and robust system of expert peer review of the sort currently fundamental to the RAE can provide this.

The obvious point must be re-stated: the difficulty with all metrics in this field, however liberally conceived, is that they measure **quantity** not quality, and in English studies quantity of output and the size of a department are not necessarily related to quality. We thus strongly support the continued use of a comprehensive and adequately resourced system of peer review.

The process could be simplified, perhaps by reducing the number of outputs read by the expert panel, for example by requiring a representative 'best output' to be submitted for each member of staff, or for a submission of 4 items (as currently) in which one or two items are flagged as 'best/lead items'. Peer review of this 'best output' could be supplemented by information about research activity similar to the current RA5 and data of the kind already held by HESA and higher education institutions.

Research quality is measured on the basis of outputs rather than of inputs. If research income is measured, weighting should be given to schemes that reward excellence in research without necessarily bringing in large amounts of money (The AHRC leave scheme, for example). A raw income system would be inappropriate for most research in the arts and humanities, where the best work is often low-cost. This would, perversely, have the effect of pushing the cost of research in English upwards.

An appropriate and workable model might combine peer review, the collection of more information about activities currently reported in the 'esteem' section of the RAE and the discriminating use of inputs which might include research council income, institutional investment, PG completion, etc.

It remains vital, however, that peer review is a transparent, consultative process that carries the full confidence of the subject communities. The RAE process has retained the confidence of the community by seeking nominations for panel and sub-panel members from those groups (in the case of English, CCUE and the English Association in addition to CUDAH) who represent the research community in English. The lack of consultation with any of the subject associations over the establishment of the AHRC 'Expert Group' this summer was a clear break with this tradition and has caused considerable concern within the subject community.

5 What are the possible undesirable behavioural consequences of the different models and how might the effects be mitigated?

Comments:

No detailed models for non-STEM subjects are offered in the document. However colleagues in English have the following overall concerns:

(1) **Research Income:** That concentration on research income will encourage an emphasis on the types of research which attract such the most income, e.g. large editing projects, rather than others which do not, thus skewing the nature of the discipline and preventing the emergence of new research areas or methods that are not intrinsically high-cost. Encouraging a focus on high input cost research is thus likely to provide a perverse incentive to increase the overall cost of research in English, a discipline that has hitherto been commended for its extremely good 'value for money'.

(2) **Citation Metrics:** That the nature of the discipline should not be distorted by a move to measurement by journal citations. Such measurement is regarded as impracticable and inappropriate for many areas within the discipline. While journal publication is important in some areas, it only accounts for 1/3 of publications in English overall. If journal metrics were introduced, this may well encourage a move away from the research monograph, the scholarly edition, and the collection of essays, forms of publication which remain at the heart of the discipline.

It is difficult to see how any accurate ranking of journals could be constructed given the breadth and diversity of the field. Ranking journals will tend to overload those ranked highest and adversely effect submissions to newer, specialist, or trans-disciplinary journals. The comprehensive failings of the recent ERIH/ESF journal index have revealed just how inaccurate any attempt to rank journals, or even to cluster them into broad categories, can be in a diverse field such as English.

On a pragmatic level, citation does not measure the significance or value of the work. It is, for example, as likely to indicate disagreement with the article cited (and so potentially its inaccuracy) as agreement. More fundamentally, journal publication is only a relatively minor element in the publication profile in English. Monographs, collections of essays, and electronic sources must, from the outset, all be included in any citation index that seeks accurately to measure the scope and quality of research in English Studies.

Measuring Quantity rather than Quality: It is of primary importance to the health of the discipline that the assessment of research should not focus on the measurement of quality rather than quantity. Measuring the quantity of postgraduate students, publications, etc, is likely to encourage institutions to prioritise PG recruitment and the publication of large numbers of articles at the expense of rigorous quality control, so producing the unintended and perverse outcome that quality (of both published work and graduate intake) will fall rather than rise.

The sorts of metrics currently under consideration (grant income, PG numbers, journal indices, citations, numbers of research active staff) would, if given undue weight, seriously disadvantage areas of research activity important to the health and future growth of the discipline. In English the fields of Creative Writing and Pedagogical Research, for example, each important emerging elements of the UK intellectual economy, do not publish research in journals in the same way as more conventional literary or linguistic research, and do not conventionally attract large amounts of grant income. Use of citation indices would not, therefore, be helpful to them.

Nor is it simply newer or smaller sub-fields of English that would potentially be disadvantaged by the application of the wrong sorts of metrics (although this *is* likely in many cases and provides a good reason for caution in and of itself). Many of the core activities in English, including the classic instances of the monograph, scholarly edition, or database created by a single scholar, or the collected volume of essays by many hands, are likely to fail to register well in a metrical exercise based on money and PG numbers.

COST. If the cost of the current RAE methodology (in both time and money) forms part of the case for its replacement, it is essential to model the likely real costs of any alternative system making greater use of metrics.

The forms of 'proxy' indicator currently under consideration will simply displace the costs involved from transparent forms to hidden ones. Placing greater emphasis upon grant income, for example, is likely greatly to increase applications to the Research Councils. All such applications will have to be assessed by members of bodies such as the AHRC Peer Review College, work which is currently undertaken gratis and on the basis of goodwill. If it were to form the basis of any future funding formula, such work would have to be paid for and the system made more transparent.

6 In principle, do you believe that a metrics-based approach for assessment or funding can be used across all institutions?

Comments:

No, the available evidence suggests that smaller, specialist institutions would suffer if this were the case, as would small units in larger institutions.

Among the distinctive characteristics of research in English as a discipline is the fact that excellence does not rely upon concentrations of researchers in particular places ('critical mass'). High quality research is conducted across the range of institutions nationally, often with only modest investment, and the most engaging new sub-fields of the discipline have often emerged from the smaller departments and HEIs. Any system that threatened this spread and diversity would be prejudicial and have potentially dire consequences for the health of the discipline generally as well as for English studies in particular kinds of institution.

7. Should the funding bodies receive and consider institutions' research plans as part of the assessment process?

Comments:

To attach greater significance to such plans would encourage institutions and units to make impressive statements about the quality of their own work, statements which, *prima facie*, could not be authenticated unless they were correlated with a comprehensive

system of expert peer review of future output. Without such a comprehensive system for the review of outputs it would not be possible accurately to assess such research plans.

8. How important do you feel it is for there to continue to be an independent assessment of UK higher education research quality for benchmarking purposes? Are there other ways in which this could be accomplished?

Comments:

CCUE colleagues strongly support the continued independent expert peer assessment of UK higher education research quality. In the arts and humanities, the current RAE system has the confidence of the community, largely because of its peer review component. It is crucial that such independent assessment by trusted senior colleagues should continue to be a major part of the process by which research is evaluated. **We thus strongly recommend a ‘Peer review informed by metrics’ model as the way forward (rather than ‘metrics moderated by peer review’)**

English is an extremely broad discipline, whose research activities range from creative writing to quantitative socio-linguistics, from literary biography to archive creation, literary theory and pedagogic research. Its scope and methodologies are constantly developing, so any assessment methodology will need to be extremely sensitive in allowing room for both a broad diversity of research practice and the emergence of new approaches, fields, and methods over time. One of the great strengths of the RAE sub-panel criteria over the years has been that they have sought to reflect what the field is doing, and what excellence in research might mean to practitioners in all the aspects of English Studies, rather than to set criteria that will inevitably favour one kind of activity, institution, or approach over others, and so distort the field. We would hope that any changes to the system will be equally responsive (rather than ‘strategic’), and will be alert to the prospect that metrics that work well in adjacent and cognate disciplines might well not be so benign when applied to English, or to all the various kinds of English equally.

Professor Greg Walker, Chair, Council for College and University English