

Council for College and University English (CCUE)

Response to Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment

Summary of Main Points

CCUE:

- has broad confidence in the present operation of research assessment and in particular its administration in 2001;
- has serious concerns about the under-funding of that exercise and its impact on all departments including those developing in research terms;
- strongly supports the principle of 'peer-expert' review informed, but not directed, by quantitative data;
- strongly opposes 'algorithmic', 'automatic' or 'rigid' methods of assessment and reiterates its full confidence in the informed judgements of a 'peer-expert' panel;
- believes that, in a subject like English, criteria for judgements of quality are developed most successfully in the operations of such a panel;
- recommends a balance of retrospective and prospective components in assessment without undue weight to historical performance;
- supports assessment based upon existing disciplines with appropriate appraisal of, and respect for, interdisciplinary work;
- recognises an argument for differences in method, but not differences in the philosophy of assessment in different subject areas;
- is sceptical of any benefit to be derived from greater attention to 'thematic areas' or increased self-assessment;
- believes that the current period of assessment is about right;
- advocates enhanced guarantees of consistency of operation and judgement between Panels and UoAs;
- believes that subject communities should have a say in developing definitions of the extent of the subject domain, appropriate evaluative criteria, and certain operational matters;
- recommends that institutions continue to have discretion in the way they compose their submissions.

Responses to Annex B

Group 1: Expert Review

- The English subject community strongly supports the principle and practice of peer review, but is sceptical of the value of 'experts' drawn from outside the research community. The 'expert' and the 'peer' are, in the Humanities, one and the same. It is difficult to envisage any useful contribution made by outside 'experts' and it is unlikely they would command the confidence of researchers. It is even difficult to imagine whom such people might be. Data relating to performance of all kinds is perfectly capable of evaluation by peers. The addition of outside 'experts' would add to costs without proportional benefit.
- Peer-led assessment of research quality is aided by data of all kinds but (as the document says) 'the ultimate responsibility for decisions rests with' those deemed to have expertise.
- CCUE can see no logical value in combining the assessment of teaching and research. Though departments always need to balance attention to both, it is difficult to envisage exacting criteria that would capture quality within a joint framework. A combined exercise would:
 - add to cost
 - significantly increase the burden placed upon reviewers who are, in effect, seconded from existing duties
 - lose focus in the definition of quality

- discourage the reward of distinction by regression to a mean of overall performance
- add to the burden of assessment placed on departments.
- Assessment should incorporate both prospective and retrospective factors. However performance in previous assessment cycles can provide no reliable predictive indicator of future achievement. The weight given to the past must never discourage the recognition or support of developing areas.
- The objective data provided in the past exercise (on, e.g., research income and postgraduate research) were appropriate for the assessment of research in English.
- Units of Assessment should map on to discipline areas. The number of Units of Assessment in RAE 2001 was about right. We are aware of the dangers this poses for interdisciplinary work, and mechanisms for recognising the full value of its contribution should be sought. But more broadly-conceived groups of neighbour subjects (e.g. 'the Humanities') would not be free of the same problem (for instance, recognition of work including both science and art). It would also gravely risk distorting the assessment of quality in distinctive research communities. In attending to legitimate concerns surrounding interdisciplinary research it is important not to lose sight of the greater proportion of research presently successfully produced within existing disciplinary frameworks.
- The option of organising assessment around thematic areas is not appropriate for two reasons: devising credible thematic areas in a subject as diverse as English is likely to be unnecessarily divisive or (equally dangerous) unhelpfully and blandly inclusive. Equally, once created, the implied high valuation of named thematic areas is likely to be formative of future research agendas. It is difficult to see compensatory advantages in such a move.
- CCUE sees major strengths in the existing system of expert assessment where 'expert' and 'peer' are coterminous. This system:
 - carries the trust and confidence of the research community
 - enables the community to have a very direct connection with the process of evaluation
 - immediately and directly recognises the developing nature of research activity in a given field
 - ensures that criteria of judgement are thoroughly informed, up-to-date and emerge from actual practice

Weakness are comparatively few. The 'peer-expert' system:

- may inhibit the recognition of some forms of interdisciplinary work
- makes the discussion of comparability of standards between UoA's more difficult (and more urgent).

CCUE believes that these weaknesses are operationally ameliorable within current arrangements.

Group 2: Algorithm

- Definitions of quality of research within subject domains like English arise from the practice of research in a diverse, resilient, innovative and widely productive subject community. They are not easily or appropriately susceptible to quantitative judgements.
- The various algorithmic components identified in para. 8 of the document are not impressive:
- reputation surveys are acutely vulnerable to impressionism, prejudice and ignorance. They would also require regular, costly updating which in turn would result in increased burdens, 'questionnaire fatigue' and a loss of confidence in process.
- In English (and probably many other areas within and beyond the Humanities), there is no direct, or even tellingly indirect, correlation between the generation of external research income and quality of work achieved. Levels of income might be *indicative* of likely quality in a minority of activities. But basing judgements of research quality on measures of income would be like judging the quality of teaching by measuring the duration of a class. The latter might enable (or disable) the former. It cannot create it.
- Citation indexes in the humanities are inappropriate because:

- there are currently no established means to collect and disseminate such data that carry any confidence in the research community;
- the establishment of such means would be costly and take significant time;
- bibliometric measures do not accurately capture research quality or value because:
- citation conventions function differently in Humanities as compared to other disciplines in which citation indexes operate on an established basis,
- the influence of a particular piece of research is often felt over lengthy periods of time or its impact is gradual
- the forms of publication are too diverse to admit standardised classification (e.g., in English, a poem and an academic essay).
- Research student numbers inexactly correlate to staff research in terms of both volume and quality. In addition, any substantial reliance on this as a measure would prejudice judgements against departments without postgraduate research cultures or with ones in process of development.
- It is exceptionally difficult to see how measures of financial sustainability might be devised for research in English, let alone be used in responsible assessment. Would the measure include judgements as to the financial health of the HEI to which the department belongs? Would they evaluate the means to sustain a sabbatical system, for instance? Or research-related promotions? Or to support conference attendance, or visits to major libraries or archives? It is difficult to see how such information might be gathered; it is difficult to see how HEIs and the funding councils would manage the political consequences of producing such information; it is difficult, indeed, to see what use it would be in indicating quality of research.
- CCUE would advise the funding councils not to attempt to devise algorithms to assess research quality in English and other Humanities subjects at least. They are inappropriate to responsible, reliable and accurate judgements. Data pertaining to external research income and research students numbers and completions are, however, entirely appropriate as aids to judgement and were provided in RAE 2001.

Group 3: Self-assessment

- There is already an appropriate and fair element of self-assessment within current arrangements. This does not require Departments to bid explicitly for status or support overly-ambitious claims.
- A more prominent self-assessment component would discourage honesty and threaten the principle of ‘peer-expert’ evaluation. A partial scrutiny of submissions by ‘validators’ would endanger confidence in the system, encourage ‘games-playing’, and be potentially prejudicial in favour of established departments or against developing ones. Most importantly, it would compromise the respected principle of thorough ‘peer-expert’ review on which so much confidence in current arrangements rests.
- It is difficult to see how increasing self-assessment would significantly relax the overall burden of assessment.
- It is difficult to see how it would benefit the security of the assessment process.

Group 4: Historical Ratings

- Historically-orientated assessment might provide a fair indication of anticipated (but not actual) achievement if it could be assumed that the starting-line was the same in all cases. But such an assumption cannot be made. Differences in funding, historical mission and point of entry to research assessment prohibit such an assumption.
- It is hard to imagine an historically-weighted system operating without prejudice against new areas of research or emergent units. It is equally difficult to imagine a parallel system devised to support developing areas operating with parity of esteem or, under current funding deficits, even proportional equivalence of resource.
- Finally, CCUE does not believe that a sensible argument supporting even the predictive power

of the historical record can be sustained on the evidence of a comparative study of the RAE results in English from 1996 and 2001. This is true in terms of the fates of individual departments, and the overall achievement of the body of research submitted to the UoA.

- CCUE is therefore not impressed by the prospect of gearing the assessment process towards the historical record. It can see no significant strengths or benefits deriving from such a system. As with quantitative data, historical information is likely to be of use in forming judgements by ‘peer-expert’ panels. It should not constrain or inspire such judgements.

Group 5: Cross-Cutting Themes

These responses are keyed directly to the questions posed under para. 17 and in some cases respond directly to the commentary provided.

17a) *What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?*

- Assessment of the research base should be used to:
 - gain information about research performance
 - ensure sustainable funding of high quality research activity on the evidence of such information
 - deliver information about research trends within particular fields
 - enable (but not directly influence) planning and development.

The use of information deriving from assessment, by for example HEIs themselves, is incidental but unavoidable.

- While the importance of the principle of selectivity is recognised, assessment should not be used merely to justify the apportionment of an inadequate total sum without major consideration of the need to sustain the research base, including its developing as well as established parts.
- CCUE believes it essential that the national assessment process be kept at arms’ length from the work of other agencies, particularly the research councils. An increasingly singular system is likely to discourage initiative and variety, limit alternatives, vest too much power in too few places, constrain the opportunity to seek support for particular projects, slow down response rates (the two processes operate on very different time scales), and further confuse assessment with support.

17b) *How often should research be assessed?*

- The current period of seven years is entirely appropriate to Arts and Humanities disciplines for reasons acknowledged within the existing RAE. Any reduction in this period would cause grave difficulties in terms of project planning and the ability of assessment to capture research in English at full value.
- CCUE can see no obvious advantage in assessment programmes of a ‘rolling’ kind. They would increase the burden of assessment and further discourage long-term projects.
- CCUE can see an argument for different systems of assessment for different subject areas. Issues such as the use of bibliometric data, for example, have different implications. However, while the difference between, say, the Humanities and the natural sciences are in most respects reasonably substantial, in other areas differences may not be so readily apparent. The assessment process would want to avoid a complex proliferation of systems. CCUE would be concerned about the likely recurrent burden on HEIs of different systems operating on different time-scales.

17c) *What is excellence in research?*

- Generic definitions of excellence covering the whole span of research activity in the UK will inevitably be uncomfortably light weight and of little informing use. Activity in different areas will sustain different definitions. In English, for example, there will be a higher premium placed on certain kinds of creativity; less on applicability. But even here words like 'creative' are, like 'excellence' and 'quality', unstable in use and definition. 'Creative writing' is currently admissible as research in English. But this does not mean to say that other kinds of creativity are not at work in other research in the subject; or that creativity is inapplicable in all subject domains. It will simply indicate a different kind of quality, but one readily appreciated within the field of research. The consultation paper is occupied with questions of assessment 'philosophy'. CCUE believes that the pursuit of 'essentialist', generic definitions of excellence are largely a forlorn and pointless quest.
- Quality in research in English might be defined as the best work by the current generation of scholars and writers, judged by criteria emerging from within the research community (who are also its major users), without prejudice to the kind and nature of the activity under scrutiny. The 'peer-expert' process is well-designed to capture this.

17d) *Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?*

- One of the few really credible complaints against the operation of the RAE in both 1996 and 2001, was the perception that Panels, while consistent in their own judgements, produced implausibly variable judgements relative to each other. (That is, the award of higher ratings was surprisingly larger in some cases than in others.) The administration of whatever system emerges for the future will have to attend to this problem which will need urgent and convincing resolution if assessment results are to be geared directly to proportional funding in any way.
- A variant of this issue is as follows: if 'peer-expert' Panels are the cornerstone of any mature judgement of research quality, these Panels will not wish to have their judgements too directly distracted by the need to present high-profile results for their subject area. Explicitly tying funding volumes to assessment outcomes is bound to introduce a very significant inflationary pressure.
- It follows from this, given the scepticism CCUE feels for purportedly 'automatic' or 'objective' measures of quality (see above), that direct subject-based allocation of funding using assessment data would jeopardise the security, fairness and esteem of the assessment process.
- The determination of funding levels should therefore occur outside the assessment process. It should prioritise adequate base-line support, reward for distinction, and support for research development in all research domains.

17e) *Should each institution be assessed in the same way?*

- All institutions should be assessed in the same way. Processes of judgement should take appropriate account of development stage and other historical factors as noted above. Ladders of improvement within a common structure are vital for a fair and dynamic system.

17f) *Should each subject or group of cognate subjects be assessed in the same way?*

- CCUE can see an argument for differences in method, but not differences in the philosophy of assessment in different subject areas (see 17b above and bullet 6 under Group 1 responses).
- CCUE believes that subject communities should have a say in developing, for example, definitions of the extent of the subject domain, appropriate evaluative criteria, and certain operational matters (e.g. the composition of the Panel and the range of its expertise). Such consultations create trust and good will, enhance the esteem of the process, and ensure the adequacy of some aspects of coverage and approach. This occurred in the last exercise in

relation to English and was widely welcomed. CCUE would not welcome its diminution; but nor would it particularly seek its expansion.

- As argued in the response to Group 1 above, CCUE believes that the integrity of subject groups should be maintained.

17g) *How much discretion should institutions have in putting together their submissions?*

- Institutions should have discretion in the way they put submissions together. Authority should rest with the entity which has budgetary and managerial responsibility for research which, in most cases, is the HEI to which departments and units belong. In most cases this authority is properly devolved towards those engaged directly in the research in question.
- If we have understood the proposition in para. 2 of the commentary correctly, it seems to us inconceivable that researchers should or could act independently, or semi-independently, of the institution that houses them. They share, for example, facility and staffing costs spanning a range of activities including research. The idea that research units operate semi-autonomously from the HEI to which they belong, or exclusive of other duties and activities, seems to us, in this subject domain, absurd.
- We are aware of allegations that institutions played games with submissions. We are aware that individuals allege unfairness in relation to their own treatment. In relation to the former, if this did occur in English it seems to have occurred on scale too small to justify wholesale revisions of the system. In relation to the second issue, CCUE has no view about alleged cases of unfairness to individuals. However, the Council believes that RAE 2001 contained intelligent and explicit safeguards which would protect, for example, new researchers or those engaged on long-term projects. The exercise, in our view, did not on the whole impose unreasonable demands or expectations on individual researchers. Where HEIs may have interpreted the demands of the exercise unreasonably is an institutional matter and not one for the assessment process.
- Para. 2 claims that ‘a more rigid system’ is the alternative to more localised control. Para. 3 asserts that both ‘would provide more objective results’. But ‘a more rigid system’ is not the only alternative. And it is unlikely that either version ‘would provide more objective results’ if ‘objective’ means fair and accurate judgements of quality.
- The commentary alleges ‘significant disadvantages’ in current arrangements without specifying them. We are unclear what these are and doubt they are so grave. One strong argument for supporting the high degree of discretion presently enjoyed by institutions is that it enables HEIs and research units with very different missions and histories to present their best case within explicit and, by and large, generous frameworks. It is very likely that a ‘more rigid’ approach will be unable to recognise the variety of structures for research management in devising its ‘rigid’ protocols. The present system – for all its (perhaps overstated) susceptibility to ‘games playing’ – does at least offer a pragmatic, enabling solution to known inequities in the historical distribution of resource, while providing for the recognition and support of distinction from wherever it emerges.

17h) *How can a research assessment process be designed to support equality of treatment for all groups of staff in Higher Education?*

- It is essential that the assessment process should not encourage tacitly, unwittingly or deliberately any form of discrimination against individuals or groups, or against particular areas of research activity in which such individuals or groups might be engaged.
- It is not clear to us that the structure, as distinct from the operation of the present system encourages such abuse. If discrimination occurs it is likely to originate within institutions or research communities and it is their primary responsibility. The best safeguard against discrimination within the operation of the research assessment process is the election of ‘peer-expert’ panels sensitive to relevant issues, and the development of protocols for judgement which acknowledge the legitimacy of all relevant research and give full measure to the work

of all researchers in the domain.

17i) *Priorities*

- CCUE declines to answer this question. A choice between equally admirable qualities is a false choice in this context.

Group 6: Have We Missed Anything?

In a recent THES (15/11/02), Sir Gareth Roberts writes that the RAE has had ‘unintended consequences’: ‘The distortion of research priorities and distraction of universities from their teaching mission, from developing young researchers or from working with public services, businesses and the community are cited as examples.’ It is not clear to us that any such direct ascriptions can be made.

It is unclear to us in what way ‘research priorities’ in English have been distorted. It is arguable that teaching missions have not, in fact, been neglected during the course of five successive RAEs. Indeed the quality of teaching nationally might be thought to have improved over this long period, as successive QA findings suggest. (Though it is hard to know what baseline can be selected to sustain arguments about either gross decline or gross improvement, such has the sector changed in scale of operation.) If young researchers are being neglected, it seems more sensible to select the general funding crisis as a culprit than a specific mechanism such as the RAE. The widespread use of short-term contracts, for instance, by universities unable to promise a longer commitment, is a more aggressive form of short-termism than a modest expectation of a four-item submission to the next RAE – from which necessary expectation they are, in any case, currently exempt. As for working with public service, business and the community, it is hard to know when the ‘deflection’ occurred. It is historically more characteristic of British HEIs to operate independently. If a fuller involvement is now desirable (which CCUE would support), then that extra activity should be properly funded and managed and not added as a wished-for afterthought to research assessment.

It is right that the RAE should come under scrutiny, and that radical improvements should periodically be considered (though CCUE does not believe that they are necessary now). It is also right to have broad concerns about teaching, young staff and the public presence of British universities. It is quite another matter to attribute difficulties in these areas to the ‘unintended consequences’ of the mechanism of research assessment. So if CCUE has any other comment to make in this consultation to rectify an omission, it is that the broader picture of the funding of British HEI should not be laid aside. The crisis, which includes research, is of more importance than anything.

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