



The Save British Science Society

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Time for a change

SBS response to the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee's follow-up inquiry into the Research Assessment Exercise

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this response to the committee's follow-up inquiry into the RAE. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. We begin with a few paragraphs dealing with the specific details of the current proposals, before moving to a more general critique of the RAE, with proposals for a new system to replace it.

Current proposals

3. If we must have some kind of RAE, then without question, the new system of quality profiles will be an improvement on the old gradings. Precipitate discontinuities in funding at the boundaries between grades have never been justified, and we believe them to be unjustifiable. It is to be hoped that the new system will distribute money more fairly than the previous system.

4. However, there remain very serious problems with the new proposals. The most serious is that institutions will not have any idea in advance how their assessment scores will translate into financial rewards. Sir Gareth Roberts' Review was unambiguous in saying that "it is of the first importance that there is a clear and predictable relationship between assessment outcomes and funding".¹ Roberts even published (as Figure 4 of his report) a hypothetical table, illustrating how this could be done simply and clearly, recognizing that the various weightings would be different in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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5. The rejection of this principle by the Funding Councils will make the proposed RAE in 2008 very unfair. It is open to the Councils to say that work scored with 3-stars under the new system will receive twice as much money as work scored with 1-star. It is equally open to them to say that the factor will be three times as much, or 25 times as much, or 57.8 times as much, or 100 times as much, or any other number. The precise value is, in essence, a political decision.

6. However, universities are not to be given *any* advance warning of what the ratio will be.

7. It is as if they are playing a game in which they do not know the rules, because the referee will not even decide what the rules are until after the game has ended. It is like living in Alice's *Wonderland*.

8. Another problem with the proposed system is that the next assessment proposes to grade work that was carried out between 2001 and 2004, even though *nobody* knew during that period what the assessment would ask them to achieve. Vice Chancellors and Heads of Department, and their staff, may end up being penalised for perfectly defensible decisions, taken in good faith in, say, 2002, which had knock-on consequences that will affect the results of the assessment. This cannot be fair.

9. All in all, despite the fact that the new proposals contain some improvements over the previous RAE, they contain fundamental inequities, principally caused by the fact that people and individuals will be judged, and rewarded or penalised, as a result of an assessment covering a period during which they did not know what the nature of the assessment would be, and the outcome of which, in terms of financial reward, will remain secret until it is too late to do anything about it.

The purpose of Research Assessment

10. Throughout the whole process of reviewing the RAE, there has been a refusal on the part of the Government to address the question of what the RAE is for.

11. If it is intended as a peer review process, it is unnecessary duplication, because the bulk of what is assessed is either (a) grant income, which has already been handed out on the basis of rigorous peer review, and (b) papers, patents and other publications, which are also rigorously reviewed, in various ways, before publication.

12. Not surprisingly, as the President of the Royal Society has demonstrated, the outcome of the peer review process of the RAE is almost identical to the outcome of the peer review process for grant applications.² In other words, hundreds of people spend a year

assessing information that thousands of people have spent months preparing, and produce an outcome that could have been reached in a few minutes. Most of those people could have spent that time better doing more research

13. Moreover, the costs of this process, although *relatively* small (compared to other administrative processes), come out of a research budget that is already inadequate. The money would be better spent doing more research.

14. The new proposals will continue to force thousands of people to spend large sums of money and huge amounts of time only to discover that nothing has changed, and that the best research is still being done by the people with competitive grants who publish in competitive journals.

A new proposal

15. While acknowledging that the RAE has run its course, SBS sees some problems in suggestions, such as that by the Royal Society, that the money can simply be distributed on the basis of topping-up existing peer-reviewed grants.

16. Any funding system needs to recognise that, in a world of over 100 universities, each distinct from the others, we cannot simply return to the good old days when dual support worked well. We must, however, attempt to preserve what was good about the good old days, while adjusting to modern constraints.

17. Our proposal for “triple support”, although it contains three elements, is probably simpler to understand than the ambiguities of dual support as it is currently supposed to work.

18. First, academic salaries should be paid out of a block grant, as at present. The size of the block grant distributed to each institution might well be decided on a simple model like that proposed by the President of the Royal Society, and would not require a burdensome assessment procedure.

19. The second element of triple support would be the bulk of the rest of the available funds, which would be distributed prospectively by the Research Councils; they would pay at least 100% of the full economic costs of the work they supported. There would be no ambiguity or possibility of blaming others for the underfunding of research projects. The onus would lie squarely with the Research Councils to pay full costs. Depending on available resources and political will, they might pay more than 100% of full costs, to ensure that the people in the best institutions were rewarded with unencumbered funds to pursue their own ideas.

20. The third element would be small in magnitude but hugely important. Distributed according to a very simple formula (perhaps nothing more than a capitation based on a headcount), it would allow institutions a small pot of money for entirely novel and blue skies research. Because it would be identified as a separate stream, it would not be possible for Governments to blur the boundaries, as they can under the current dual support system, allowing “blue skies” funds to be diverted to prop up unsustainable funding elsewhere.

21. Because the amount of money in the third element of triple support would be relatively small, there would be no need for a complex research assessment process, and because it would be distributed simply, there would be no possibility of particular groups and individuals demanding “their” shares (these demands should in any case be met by the second element of the scheme). This would leave local managers with genuine flexibility to pursue unfashionable, novel and untested avenues of research.

22. There is no doubt that such a scheme would need refining, and there is also no doubt that the political establishment must stop passing the buck and decide whether it wants to provide more money or accept less research. The current volume of research is not sustainable on current funding levels.

23. The RAE has run its course, and although the new proposals introduce some improvements, it is time for the Government and the research community to face up to the fact that it has outlived its usefulness, and that a new system is needed for distributing research funding fairly, with a proper balance between grants for specific projects and unencumbered funds for new ideas.

April, 2004

¹ *Joint consultation on the review of research assessment: Consultation by the UK funding bodies on the review by Sir Gareth Roberts, 2003* [HEFCE 2003/22]

² *The UK's dual support system: Time for a fundamental review?* Anniversary Address by the President of the Royal Society, 2003.