



# The Save British Science Society

29-30 Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9QU

Tel: 020 7679 4995 Fax: 020 7916 8528

SBS 03/16

## What is being assessed, and why?

SBS response to the Joint Consultation on the Review of Research Assessment

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this response to the review of research assessment. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.
2. SBS makes a point of attempting to set out the principles by which policies should be judged, rather than getting bogged down in the detail of particular proposals. In this document, we attempt to identify a small number of such principles relating to the assessment of research as a method for determining the distribution of funding via the Funding Councils.
3. We begin, in paragraphs 4 to 21, with what we believe is the real problem with the operation of the current system, and then offer some thoughts about some of the specific proposals in the consultation document.

## ***The distribution of money***

4. Although this is a review of research assessment rather than funding, and although it is explicit that each Council will “take an independent view on research funding,” SBS believes that assessment and funding cannot be so lightly disaggregated.
5. Many of the problems of the RAE are actually problems of funding, in particular the amount of funding available to reward achievements that the exercise has measured, *relative* to the demands made upon it (rather than in absolute terms – this is not simply a plea for more Government money to be invested in the science base, welcome though that would be).

### Executive Committee

R W Joyner FRSC (Chr)  
W Banks FREng  
D Braben  
F E Close OBE  
R Dowler  
M Freeman  
L Georgiou  
H Griffiths FREng

J McGlade  
J C McLachlan  
U Martin  
D Noble CBE FRS  
S J Robinson OBE FRS FREng  
P T Saunders  
V Stone  
M Trevan

### Advisory Council

Sir Geoffrey Allen FRS FREng  
Prof S Arnott CBE FRS  
Sir Eric Ash CBE FRS FREng  
Professor V Bruce OBE FRSE  
Dr Simon Campbell FRS FRSC  
Sir David Cox FRS  
Prof A Cullen OBE FRS FREng  
Sir Richard Doll CH FRS  
Sir Brian Follett FRS  
Dr Ian Gibson MP

Prof A Hewish FRS  
Sir R Hoffenberg KBE FRCP  
Sir Hans Kornberg FRS  
Sir Harold Kroto FRS  
Lord Lewis of Newnham FRS  
Prof J Lamb FRSE  
Prof C Llewellyn Smith FRS  
Sir Ian Lloyd  
Sir John Maddox  
Sir Paul Nurse FRS  
Dame Bridget Ogilvie

Dr Tom Inch FRSC  
Sir Martin Rees FRS  
Sir Derek Roberts FRS FREng  
Baroness Sharp of Guildford  
Sir David Smith FRS  
Sir Richard Southwood FRS  
Sir Richard Sykes FRS  
Ian Taylor MBE MP  
Sir John Vane FRS  
Prof Maurice Wilkins CBE FRS  
Dr Ivan Yates CBE FREng

6. Many of the complaints about the RAE – for example that it is implicated in the enforced closure of perfectly good university departments<sup>1</sup> - are actually to do with the way that funds are distributed according to the results of the assessment.
7. As SBS demonstrated in its response to the initial round of consultation<sup>2</sup>, the uses to which “quality-related” (QR) money are supposed to be put are (perhaps deliberately) somewhat vague, with different parties holding different interpretations.
8. However, there is a common belief that QR money should
- (a) as part of the dual support system, provide the underpinning, indirect funding to support the direct costs funded by Research Council grants
  - (b) provide flexibility to support some blue-skies research, for example by investing in a novel idea from a young researcher who would not yet be able to obtain Research Council funding, and
  - (c) provide the funds for some research training.
9. Of the various uses to which the QR money might be put, the magnitude of one, namely the underpinning of Research Council grants, is determined by factors outside the control of the Funding Councils. As the Research Council budget rises, the need for underpinning resources increases proportionately. But while the overall budget of the Research Councils has risen by a factor of 123% (in real terms) since 1987, the Funding Councils’ overall budget has risen by only 26%.<sup>3</sup>
10. In other words, a vastly greater proportion of the Funding Council investment now goes into meeting the indirect costs of Research Council projects, leaving little or nothing “left over” for the other purposes to which QR money might properly be applied.
11. Although the interpretation of the dual support system varies, one aspect is admirably clear in the 1993 White Paper that created the current incarnation of the dual support system. It says that Funding Council investment is available for use “at the institutions’ discretion”.<sup>4</sup>
12. The *Cross-Cutting Review of Science and Research*, completed in advance of the 2002 Spending Review, speaks of QR providing three things, of which one is “the freedom to pursue a certain amount of blue skies research” as distinct from “the base from which...academics can make credible proposals [to Research Councils or elsewhere]”. It further defines the need for “research which is directed from within institutions which may be purely curiosity-driven or may be in rapid reaction to advances in a given field,” and attributes this role to the QR funding universities receive from the Funding Councils.<sup>5</sup>

13. Many institutions now feel that such discretion has evaporated, largely because of the imbalance between Research Council and Funding Council investment. To express the figures more starkly, in 1986, for every £1 of Research Council funding for specific projects, the forerunners of the Funding Councils provided £1.27 to meet indirect costs, pay for research training and allow local discretion in supporting blue-skies projects etc.<sup>6</sup> By the financial year 2004-05, the figure will be 66p, a fall of almost exactly a half.<sup>7</sup> Only a small part of this was the deliberate transfer of money within the dual support system.

14. The effect of these changes is that many Heads of Department within universities now find that their QR allocation is barely sufficient to meet the indirect costs of those projects for which other government sources are paying the direct costs. The idea of local discretion to invest in blue-skies research, or in untested young talent, has largely disappeared.

15. Whatever method the Funding Councils choose to assess research (indeed, however they choose to distribute their investment), unless the amount of money available is in approximate proportion to that available from the Research Councils, many of the problems that are currently blamed on the RAE will persist.

16. Changing the name from the RAE to the RQA will not change this, nor will altering the details from the current vague generalities about “the majority of” or “almost all” research meeting some standard to the proposed quantifying specific percentages of research worthy of one, two or three stars (which seems to be the main difference between the old and new systems).

17. SBS stresses that, although we believe the science base should ultimately be funded at levels higher than at present, our argument here is **not** about the total quantum of taxpayers’ money that is invested in publicly funded research.

18. We merely point out that the **balance** between different funding streams has become so skewed that the problems of the science base will not be solved by tinkering with assessment procedures, and attempting to divorce these procedures from the funding decisions that (in reality) rest on them.

19. We believe that it is no coincidence that, although many people were hugely critical of the RAE, the considered opinion of Sir Gareth Roberts’ review, having consulted many interested parties, is that there is little point in really fundamental or radical change.

20. SBS believes that the arguments in this section demonstrate why this is. The RAE in itself is not the problem. The distribution of funding is.

21. The dual support system is lumbering around on two legs that have been treated unequally. One is wearing only a sock, while the other is on a stilt.

### ***Individual assessment***

22. As a basic principle, SBS supports the view that it is individuals, not institutions, that perform research, and we can see the arguments in favour of assessing individuals. However, the current proposal seems to be ambiguous.

23. The wording of the original document appears to have been widely understood to indicate that individuals would indeed be scored, because one of the “Frequently Asked Questions” to which Sir Gareth Roberts responded on 16 July 2003 was “How will you prevent individual scores becoming known?”<sup>8</sup> The answer was that the “report does *not* propose that panels score individuals” [our italics].

24. The main review document does not actually say that individuals will be assessed, but it does say that institutional profiles would not be published if “individual performance could be inferred from it”. And the answer to the Frequently Asked Question suggested that sometimes “there is a risk that individuals could be identified”.

25. We find it difficult to comment on something that remains somewhat ambiguous.

### ***Secrecy***

26. SBS has two main concerns about Recommendation 5b, that assessments should sometimes be kept secret.

27. First, modern systems of distributing public money should be open. Secrecy is rightly a thing of the past, and it seems wrong as a matter of principle that someone might have judgements made about them, where the assessment is funded out of the public purse, but neither the individual nor the public is deemed to be entitled to know what conclusions a secret cabal has drawn.

28. Second, as a matter of practicality, it seems unlikely that the attempt to prevent publication will work. However expert the panels, they will be made up of humans, and among the thousands of judgements they make, some will be wrong, and others debatable. Individuals and groups who have any grounds for believing that their work has been misjudged, or institutions who believe some of their staff have been under-rated, may well seek to force publication of

individual results. Where there are reasonable doubts, natural justice would demand more openness in confirming or allaying those doubts.

### ***Norm-referencing and criterion-referencing***

29. The proposal (Recommendation 5c) that “panels would be given guidelines on expected proportions of [each of the] ratings” is one that moves assessment from a criterion-referenced system (in which judgements are made in absolute terms) to a norm-referenced one (in which judgements are of relative quality).

30. SBS can see no justification for such a move, except to make it easier for the Funding Councils to budget. If the proportion of top-rated research always stays the same, then it cannot happen (as it did in after the 2001 RAE) that the existing funding formula demands more absolute funds when none are forthcoming or are likely to be.

31. But the convenience of accountants working in a quango does not seem to SBS to be as important as the funding of world class research in a knowledge economy. We therefore oppose the idea that panels should be required to return an assessment stating that there are fixed proportions of different ratings, when there is no *a priori* reason or empirical evidence to suppose that this will actually be true.

### ***Proportion of eligible staff that should be submitted***

32. The proposal is that a minimum of 80% of eligible staff must be included in the submission. This appears to be an arbitrary figure, and the report certainly offers no specific justification for why 80% is more appropriate than 70%, or 90%, or any other percentage.

33. Under the proposed assessment system, our understanding is that the assessment should measure *absolute quantity* of research of different ratings, and that the Funding Councils could simply exclude any research that fell below some standard from its calculation. There need therefore be no difference in the financial allocation awarded to a department if it enters 100% of staff as if it had entered 100% of staff (the extra 20% presumably contributing “zero” in the equation).

September 2003

---

#### Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> *The Research Assessment Exercise*, Second Report of the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee, Session 2001-2002 [HC 507].

<sup>2</sup> *Clarity of purpose in assessing research*, SBS 2002 [SBS 02/20].

<sup>3</sup> *Forward Look 2003: Government funded science, engineering and technology*, DTI, 2003 [Cm5877].

<sup>4</sup> *Realising Our Potential*, HMSO, 1993 [Cm 2250].

<sup>5</sup> Cross Cutting Review of Science & Research: Final Report March 2002, HM Treasury, DfES, DTI and OST, 2002.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Forward Look 2001, Government-funded science, engineering and technology*, DTI, 2001 [Cm 5338].

<sup>7</sup> *Forward Look 2003: Government funded science, engineering and technology*, DTI, 2003 [Cm5877].

<sup>8</sup> *Review of Research Assessment: Clarification of details of the report*, Gareth Roberts, 2003.