

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The Review of Research Assessment and the Sustainability of University Research Consultation

Held at The Royal Society on Wednesday 16th July 2003

Sponsored by
Office of Science and Technology
Higher Education Funding Council for England

In the Chair: **Dr Robert Hawley CBE DSc FRSE FREng**
Deputy Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: **Sir Gareth Roberts FRS**
Chairman, Review of Research Assessment
Dr Chris Henshall
Group Director, SEB, Office of Science and Technology, DTI
Sir David Watson
Vice Chancellor, University of Brighton

DR. HAWLEY reported the death of Lord Butterworth, President of the Foundation. His achievements had been many and outstanding; and the meeting rose in silence to pay tribute to the work and life of a great man.

SIR GARETH ROBERTS said that his report¹ aimed at correcting the deficiencies in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), not eliminating it. The key feature of the present system – expert peer review – would be kept: indeed, his first recommendation was that research review must be based on expert judgement, supplemented, where appropriate, by performance indicators. But there still should be significant changes. He highlighted three of his recommendations. Recommendation 6 set out the hierarchical panel structure, each Panel having a Chairman and moderator, whose principal function would be to ensure consistency (judgements of individual Panels in the 1991 RAE had been criticised for inconsistency). Recommendation 7 acknowledged that the four publications rule was too limiting and that Panels should consider, where appropriate, the effectiveness and applicability of research to professional practice. This would help meet the concern expressed in the report² for HM Treasury by Richard Lambert that there was no incentive in the RAE for academic/business collaboration. A further recommendation met the criticism that the financial consequences of differences in grade were so considerable that Universities played games to get a higher grade by seeking a gradient rather than violent disjunctures, and aiming to reward outstanding, rather than the average research in an institution. Hence the three star proposal. Panels would be given guidance on expected proportions, but it would not be rigid. Funding would be related more to relative than absolute performance. He emphasised that the report did not support consolidation of research; did not envisage raiding funds available for Grade 4 research; and assumed dual funding would continue.

DR. HENSHALL said the problems in the consultation paper³ on the Sustainability of University Research were the mismatch between QR (Quality Related) funding from HEFCE (stable) and project funding (trebled) and the poor understanding of the cost base, with neglect of long run costs. The consequence was underfunding of the research infrastructure with, as the Transparency Review showed, both a backlog and recurrent gap, and a low price culture. That the government shown their awareness of the seriousness of the problems through additional funding ahead of change. But change – particularly cultural change - there must be. For research to be sustainable it must meet its full costs: if more cash was put in for this purpose there must be better cost recovery. This could mean fewer projects. The Higher Education White Paper sought to focus resources on the best research performers: this meant selectivity. The proposed reforms sought to retain the principles of dual funding, but remove incentives for overtrading, avoid a funding gap; and promote the necessary culture change. Further work concentrated on how to get economic costs at project level (avoiding the overhead model); doing whole system modelling; considering what to include in costs; transition arrangements; monitoring; and encouraging world class Research.

SIR DAVID WATSON raised questions about the effects of the RAE and the direction that the White Paper and government policies were taking on research. Dearing had wanted the RAE to encourage Universities to make strategic choices; the consequences were to be seen in the 1991 RAE, with both a reduction in the number of researchers included and the effective establishment of a 3A Grade floor. The White paper indicated that the floor was above Grade 4, which meant that half the work of national excellence would be unfunded, and concentrated. Was this right? Research funding needed to be more

¹ www.ra-review.ac.uk/reports/roberts.asp

² www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/0/06729/lambertemergingissues_173.pdf

³ www.ost.gov.uk/policy/universityresearch.pdf

widely spread to support new entries; to develop capacities; to ensure industrial and commercial application; and to confirm the distinctiveness of Higher Education. There needed to be diversity of research; and all courses, including professional courses, should be led by research. The Roberts Review was right to give prominence to the importance of applied research in research assessment. A particular concern was value for money. Statistics already showed that the proportion of project funding to QR funding was greater in the wider spread of Universities outside the golden triangle; and trends indicated that this would increase. Did we really want to get into the position where public money was being concentrated in those institutions, which were less able to bring in project funding from charities or industry?

The discussion opened with the fundamental challenge: was the whole RAE exercise worthwhile? What was the point of it? It was backward looking; it ignored the existence of peer review systems within Universities and assumed they were incapable of judging their own research and deciding on its utility and value; however improved, it would be academics looking at academics in isolation from the world outside; and it ended up by giving more money to scientists, not for the value to the economy of the work they did, but because they were "world class" – or in future, it appeared, better than world class (whatever that was). If the government wanted to fund world class science, it could do so directly, because everyone knew where it was being done, without all this palaver. The challenge met a vigorous defence. There is good evidence that the RAE procedure had beneficially affected the organisation and grouping of researchers, so that better quality research, with interdepartmental linkage, was being done with less overlapping. The peer review system was widely accepted and individual institutions found it valuable, no matter how good their own systems, to have an outside and impartial reviews. Most important, perhaps, was the need to provide some form of justification for spending taxpayer's money - £1.18bn but still not enough - on something whose value to the man in the street is not obvious. It is a crucial for accountability. It was also notable that other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand were moving towards the UK model of research assessment. There was a danger, however, that the RAEs would be used for purposes other than assessing the value of research for funding purposes. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) had been known to attempt to use them to guide their own policies. This should be resisted.

The dangers of looking at research in isolation from teaching, and thinking of it as a proxy for teaching, were stressed. The fundamental mission of Universities was teaching; and teaching of the quality needed could not be done in isolation from research. Whole system modelling was needed to look at the two together: the view that if research was not world class it was not of fundamental value to teaching was misguided. If research was not at the heart of every course at a Higher Education Institution, then the student was being cheated, because he was getting only second hand goods.

Many speakers, however, supported retaining the RAEs, but modifying them along the lines that the Roberts' Review proposed. Particular support was expressed for the recommendation that applied research would be evaluated

– although there were doubts whether this would lead to funding being more thinly spread over a wider area – and it was suggested that there should be special recognition for those academics who showed a particular gift for working with industry. There was also strong support for the three star recommendation that would target individual excellence. It was clear that the present system did not get the money to the people who really needed it and failed to incentivise them to stay in the UK rather than go abroad.

The principal concern was, not with the RAEs themselves, but with the funding allocation. The damage that inadequate QR funding had done to research might not have been fully appreciated: had more QR funding been available, then more project finance would have come forward. "Overtrading" was, perhaps, an emotive way to describe accepting project funding without having the QR funding to support it. It implied, perhaps rightly, insufficient financial caution on the part of an institution, and a neglect of long term consequences, but it also implied a strong desire to work with project providers and to do research which was felt to be important. Indeed Universities ought to be praised for having done a great job in pulling in such large amounts of project funding. It was all very well to say that some projects might have to be rejected when better costings were known, but there was a danger that good projects would not get done, and project funders, particularly charities, might simply move their projects abroad. Again, many speakers supported the thrust of the consultation paper, although there were concerns about whether it would significantly reduce the bureaucracy and information demands that at present burdened the system. The danger was recognised but the real problem was that the information sought and provided was not in fact very meaningful. It would be particularly important to recognise the differences between different subjects, and not have a blanket approach.

Although there was support amongst speakers for the broad thrust of both consultation reports, there was still a concern that the underlying policies in them, and the government's policies as laid out in the Higher Education White Paper, had not been properly integrated. No one could forecast what research might be needed or demanded and paid for by taxpayers' money; but did we want more or less of it? Did we want to concentrate on increasing the gearing between QR and project funding, or not? Did we want to ensure that all university teaching was research driven, or were we content to direct public funding of research to the high flyers? What was the priority to be given to applied research?

Finally, as one speaker pleaded, spare us from more consultations. We have already had eight. Post consultation hysteria was fast becoming a recognised clinical condition.

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield KCB