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REFORM OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT AND FUNDING

I am writing about the outcome of the Government's consultation exercise on the reform of research assessment and funding, which was announced in Parliament earlier today.

I should first of all confirm that the consultation has revealed that an overwhelming majority of respondents favour preserving the criteria and working methods for the 2008 RAE panels in the form originally published last January. The Government accepts this finding which, indeed, echoes the unanimous view of the chairs of the main panels as expressed in their letter of 3 August to Bill Rammell.

As to the future beyond 2008, I draw two key messages from the responses to our consultation document. First, it is clear that there is wide support within the higher education sector for the Government's aim of retaining a system of robust quality assurance to underpin the distribution of Quality Related research funding in the new arrangements that will follow the final RAE in 2008. For the last 20 years, the RAE has served this country well and it is obviously vital that the 2008 exercise should be conducted with equal rigour to its predecessors. I know that HEFCE and its partners in the RAE will all play their full part in ensuring that this happens. There is, however, a wide and growing consensus that, in the years after 2008, we will have both the opportunity and the means to move towards less bureaucratic, more transparent arrangements.

Second, it is equally clear that the sector shares the Government's determination for these new arrangements to secure a very significant reduction in the bureaucratic burdens that successive RAEs have placed on universities and their staff. These will be the guiding principles of the work which I am now asking HEFCE to take forward.

The sector has called for there to continue to be a single, overarching framework for research assessment and funding across all subject areas, coupled with continuing academic involvement in the assessment process. The Government accepts that there is a strong case for this.



It is also clear from responses to the consultation that this single framework will need to comprise a broad basket of indicators. These will need, in particular, to take account of:

- Research income from sources other than the higher education funding bodies. This will be valuable not only because of the extent of the correlation between external income and research quality that HEFCE's own modelling has demonstrated, but also because it offers a means of recognising more fairly than at present excellence in user-led research. In order to minimise burdens on institutions, you will need in particular to examine how to align HEFCE's data collection requirements for research assessment and funding purposes more closely than hitherto with those of the Higher Education Statistics Agency.
- The research infrastructure. Responses to the consultation have stressed the need to retain not only a measure of the number of active researchers in each subject area, but also some broader indicator of the quality of the research environment. Many respondents have suggested that this should include an indicator related to postgraduate students. Here, too, the Council will need to adjust its requirements to those of existing data formats wherever possible. The consultation has also revealed some support for our proposal to invite the submission of research plans at institutional level, always provided that their format is sufficiently streamlined. These may offer a means of collecting any information essential to the assessment process that absolutely cannot be gleaned from current sources.
- Research quality. There was virtual unanimity among respondents to the consultation in stressing the need to maintain a trusted index of research quality at the heart of any assessment and funding system. It is clear from the responses of many subject associations in particular that such an index may have to be compiled in different ways for different disciplines. I believe that it is of paramount importance that the approach or approaches adopted for quality assessment command the confidence of the various subject communities. It is in developing these robust quality measures that most work needs now to be done.

I know that David Eastwood is confident that it should be possible to move quickly to a fully bibliometric method of measuring quality in science, engineering, technology and medicine.

I welcome his and your enthusiasm for carrying out the necessary work to develop an indicator of this sort by September 2008, with a view to testing it against the RAE 2008 results in 2009 and beginning its phased introduction as part of the assessment and funding mechanism from the start of the 2010/11 academic year. I know that officials of HEFCE and of my Department are already discussing how to organise delivery of this task.

I accept the clear view that the subject community expressed in its consultation responses that an early move towards bibliometrics in subjects like mathematics and statistics is not currently feasible and that they will therefore need to be subject to the same arrangements as will apply to the arts and humanities and social sciences. It is clear that work on bibliometrics in these areas is not at a sufficient stage of development for a timetable to be set now for a transition to a fully metrics system. In view of this, I recognise that peer assessment, in one form or another, will need to remain the key component of quality assessment for subjects other than science, engineering, technology and medicine in the medium term.

I would stress, however, that this must not mean a simple perpetuation of the RAE for anyone. There are a number of options for selecting research outputs for peer assessment which would be substantially less onerous on universities than the current four-items-per-researcher approach. I would like HEFCE to explore in close consultation with the sector which of these most effectively reduces the RAE burden whilst offering robust quality assessment, considering both options that reduce the number of outputs reviewed, and those which offer different selection arrangements (for example selection by the advisory groups from a bibliographic list of departmental research output).

I also believe that the presumption should be for a move over time towards using a bibliometric measure of quality across all subject areas. This may be more straightforward, and therefore achievable in a shorter timescale, for some subject areas than for others.

I would be grateful if HEFCE would now take forward the work that will be needed to put these new arrangements in place. My officials will keep in close touch with yours as the work proceeds. I would also be grateful to receive a detailed report on these matters from you no later than 30 September 2007. As you know, the Government has given a commitment to update Parliament on progress in next year's Pre-Budget Report.

While recognising that research assessment and funding is a devolved matter, I know that the relevant authorities for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fully appreciate, as do I, the continuing importance of maintaining a UK-wide benchmark of university research performance. I would therefore be grateful if you would invite the higher education funding bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to take part in the work described above to the extent that they consider this appropriate.

I am copying this letter to Bill Rammell MP and David Eastwood.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the word "Yours" written above a stylized, cursive signature that appears to be "Alan".

ALAN JOHNSON