

# The Rt Hon John Denham MP

Secretary of State for Innovation,  
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**Innovation,  
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21 November 2007

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## REFORM OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT AND FUNDING

I am writing in response to David Eastwood's letter of 25 September with HEFCE's proposals on the use of bibliometrics for the assessment of research quality.

As you move into the next phase of development of a metrics-based approach to research assessment and funding, I think it is important to underline the background and context following the creation of DIUS in the summer. The Government made an important commitment at the outset to maintain the overall shape of the dual support system, under which universities receive grants for specific research projects through the Research Councils and their core research funding through HEFCE's Quality-related (QR) funding stream. The creation of DIUS, bringing together political responsibility for the key elements of public funding for university research under one roof, offers us a unique opportunity to achieve much greater coherence in the strategic direction of research funding. It also enables us to focus more clearly on further improving the application of the results of publicly-funded research, promoting innovation and maximising the effectiveness of research funding. I know that you share these concerns and have been making efforts to ensure that QR contributes to these goals.

The overarching purpose of QR remains as it was described in last year's *10-Year Science and Innovation: Next Steps* document, to allow universities "to take strategic decisions about their research activities,; build capacity to undertake 'blue skies' research and research not supported from other sources; create flexibility to react quickly to emerging priorities and new fields of inquiry; and provide a base from

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which to compete for research funding from other sources".

The RAE has worked well over the last twenty years or so and has encouraged broadly the right intensity of support to the right institutions. I believe it has enabled us as a country to maintain our competitive position internationally. It has nevertheless placed a heavy bureaucratic burden on all institutions. The key objective now is that we end up with a simpler, more transparent system, not one which leads to profound changes in the distribution of resources.

I know that David Triesman has recently had a detailed discussion with David Eastwood and raised with him a number of questions about the consultation and the new metrics-based system. I welcome the fact that HEFCE intend to include in the consultation document some explicit questions about the basket of metrics, designed to tease out whether there may be metrics, beyond those already identified, which would be useful as a means of assessing and promoting innovation. I am particularly interested in this aspect of the consultation.

I am grateful to HEFCE for all the efforts you have made to ensure that the RAE 2008 is more robust than its predecessor in relation to equal opportunities. I am very concerned that we should do all we can to maximise the scope for all those capable of excellent research to have the opportunity to carry it out and that both institutions and researchers understand the methodology that emerges. So naturally I am concerned that in moving away from the current peer-review system in favour of metrics we should not inadvertently create new barriers and undo the good work that has already gone into this. I know you share this concern and I welcome the fact that HEFCE intend to pay particular attention to this issue too, both as part of the consultation process as well as during the subsequent pilot phase.

Subject to these considerations I confirm that I am content for you to consult the sector on the basis described in your letter and especially welcome the fact that it has been possible for you to move forward in concert with the higher education funding bodies for the devolved administrations. I look forward to receiving a further report on progress from you at the end of the consultation period.

Of course, much remains to be done in developing the new bibliometrics system. As your work moves forward I trust that you will continue to involve officials of my Department as well as of the Research Councils on a day-to-day basis.



**JOHN DENHAM**