

THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN  
RESEARCH AND TEACHING

**ANNEX E**

**Views of 'new' research staff – report on seminars**

*Lead author*

**Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service**

*Part of a consortium report*

For the Fundamental Review of Research  
Higher Education Funding Council for England

*Prepared by*

J M Consulting Ltd  
Centre for Higher Education Studies  
Institute of Education (University of London)  
Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service  
Higher Education Consultancy Group

July 2000

---

## **Introduction**

1. A series of seminars for 'new' research staff was organised as part of the work undertaken by JM Consulting and Associates for the Fundamental Review. The purpose of these seminars was to canvass the views of research staff from across England at an early stage in their career, on a number of key issues relating to the Fundamental Review of Research.
2. This report begins by providing the basic details of the participants derived from questionnaires they completed. An outline of the structure of the seminars is then provided, followed by an analysis of the findings from the facilitated discussion groups, and the qualitative responses on the key issues and what might be done to address them.

## **Participants**

3. Over 370 individuals were invited to the five workshops. Forty-three per cent of the participants were from pre-1992 universities, 27% from post-1992 universities and 30% from colleges or other HE organisations.
4. Thirty-six per cent of participants came from science and technology based disciplines, 31% from the arts and humanities, and 20% from the social sciences. The remainder either defined themselves as from a clinical discipline (5%) or did not specify a discipline (8%).
5. Seventy-six per cent of the participants identified themselves as 'lecturer', 15% as 'research fellow' and 4% percent as 'research assistant'. Four per cent declined to classify their role.
6. Forty per cent of the participants had worked in their current capacity for between two and five years, 26% had been in post for between one and two years, and 23% had been in post less than one year.
7. Sixty-seven per cent of the participants were on permanent contracts, 25% were on fixed-term contracts, and the remaining 8% were on external awards or other forms of contract. One individual had a tenured position. Ninety-three per cent of the participants were full-time and 7% were part-time.
8. Eighty-four per cent of participants indicated that their institution was funding their post, 6% said they were funded by the Research Councils, 3% by charities, 1% by industry. The remaining 5% did not indicate the source of their funding.

## **Process**

---

---

9. The seminars were held in February and March 2000. Two were held in London, and one each in Leeds, Manchester, and Oxford. The events were organised by HEFCE with letters sent to Vice-Chancellors inviting them to nominate up to four staff to attend one of the seminars.

10. On arrival, participants were asked to complete a simple questionnaire requesting basic demographic data. The questionnaire also asked that during the course of the morning delegates identify the key issues for the review, from their perspective, and any measures that they thought would be helpful to address those issues.

11. A brief opening session provided an opportunity to revisit the background to the review (a briefing pack that had been provided at an earlier date) as well as to give an overview of the day's schedule. This was followed by two hours of small group discussions facilitated by the consultants supporting the review.

12. The groups were heterogeneous, with multiple participants from institutions split amongst the groups to ensure that no particular institutional issues dominated the discussions. The groups were given specific topics to discuss, and in addition were asked to identify and discuss other issues that they felt were important. The outcomes were debated in a closing plenary session which opened discussion to the floor.

13. The data on which this report is based are drawn from two sources. The first is the questionnaire: this provides demographic data outlining the participants' details and views on the two or three 'key' issues around the Review, and recommendations on how those issues might be addressed. The second source is the notes of the small group and plenary sessions. Although it was recognised that many of the views that were articulated sprang from personal experience, facilitators encouraged participants to keep in mind that they were providing input into a national review of policy and therefore should consider the general principle underlying the issue they wished to address.

## **Key findings**

### **Career pathways**

14. There is wide diversity in career development experiences. The majority of participants felt that there was little opportunity for them to plan a career path early in their academic career. Although some had progressed in a straightforward fashion from a research training position into a lectureship in their chosen discipline (a trend found most often in the arts and humanities), the majority had experienced a series of fixed-term contracts. A number of delegates held that they felt considerable pressure from the need to secure the next contract or a lectureship position while at an early stage in an existing post.

---

15. Many career moves were quite opportunistic, with individuals trying to secure a permanent post rather than a position in a chosen field. For those able to secure a lectureship position, they were often faced with extensive teaching loads, which many felt seriously affected their ability to undertake the research they would wish. Participants also noted that the massification of HE had increased the diversity of students and increased the demand for academic and pastoral support.

16. The period immediately following completion of the PhD was felt to be the most difficult for many new academic staff. There was a perception that more full-time posts were available in the post-92 institutions, which might mean moving to a less research-intensive department and so lessen their opportunities to secure necessary grants to build their research portfolio. This was perceived to be of greater concern in the science-based disciplines.

17. Those individuals who were able to find full-time research positions cited problems in progressing to more established positions. Teaching load was one problem cited, but another was that the current funding regimes do not generally allow relatively new researchers to apply for substantial research grants.

18. A number of instances of 'good practice' were noted (often, but not exclusively, in the larger, research-led institutions). Some departments provide new lecturers with mentors, as well as a reduced teaching load, so that they could establish a solid research foundation early on. Also, there were a number of instances where new lecturers are given a period of grace to develop the skills and materials necessary to support their teaching before going on to develop their research portfolio.

19. A number of participants suggested that that there was incongruity between hiring and promotion policy and the reality of institutional expectation. Often individuals reported being employed based on their capability to undertake research, only to find that they were expected to sustain extensive teaching responsibilities. The time involved in developing the necessary teaching support material and providing student support meant that little time was available (physical or intellectual) to undertake research. This resulted in new academics not being able to build the sort of research portfolio which was viewed as necessary to secure promotion.

20. Underpinning many of these issues was a general concern about the failure of some institutional research strategies to take into consideration the notion of progressive research career development. There were clear contrasts between some institutional approaches, where strategy and the related human resources issues was seen to be explicit and transparent, and other examples where there was no such link. Many participants believed that the RAE should place more emphasis on assessing the institutional research strategies and related human resource strategies with a view to supporting younger researchers.

---

21. The following measures/policy changes were suggested:

- There was strong support for seed corn funding to provide a 'starter package', that is support for new research staff in the transition phase as they move from research student to lecturer or researcher. Participants believed that this money should be ring-fenced to ensure it was used to support new research staff.
- It was suggested that the RAE should include career development strategies as an assessment criterion. The strategies should define support for new lecturing and research staff, outlining and demonstrating their approach to career progression and continuing professional development.
- A policy that allowed space for new academics to establish themselves over approximately a two year period was recommended.
- There was considerable support for the notion of a database that detailed where research grants were available, the deadlines and application criteria. It was held that this would increase the opportunities for younger researchers to progress, without having to rely on internal funding sources provided by supervisors.
- It was felt that newer researchers would benefit from an RAE assessment process that considered developmental issues, such as the progress made by new researchers and their success in research grant applications.
- There was also a concern about low remuneration levels and the effect that this might be having on the ability of HE to retain high quality young staff who would be the research leaders of the future.

### **Training and support**

22. The key finding was of very different experiences across a range of (often disciplinary-based) research cultures in institutions and departments. Generally, it was suggested that participants from established research-intensive departments often had superior training and support opportunities available to them.

23. The 'best case scenario' was held to be where an experienced mentor was designated to provide ongoing formal and informal support. The mentor ensured that the individual was protected from teaching and administrative overloading until such time as individuals were established. In such a relationship, training opportunities, both internal and external, were mutually agreed and appropriate

---

support was provided. Participants describing such arrangements in their own institutions assumed this experience to be the norm and were quite surprised to find otherwise.

24. Training and support for teaching varied widely. Some participants indicated that gaining a formal qualification for teaching (postgraduate certificate/diploma) was mandatory as part of their probation period, while others experienced only brief induction sessions. Whilst training and support for teaching was valued overall, there was a tension, as it reduced the time available for the preparation of teaching material and to engage in research.

25. There was a strong message that training in support of teaching was not necessarily generally applicable and that it should have a strong element specific to the discipline. Training needs were seen as different across disciplines, for different levels of study and, possibly, between types of institution. While the advent of the Institute for Learning and Teaching was seen by many participants (not all) to have merit, the reality of another demand to be fulfilled at the start of their careers was not particularly welcome.

26. In general, it was felt that developmental opportunities for training in both teaching and research should be made a mandatory part of institutional policy. Such activities should be quality assured on a national basis to ensure a minimum standard, and institutional strategies and provision should be assessed as part of the RAE.

27. Specific areas where training and information were sought included:

- how to prepare and present research grant applications
- project management
- counselling in career development
- enabling individuals to be effective researchers both within and beyond the HE sector
- how to supervise and mentor PhD students and other younger researchers
- information on the criteria used in the RAE (and institutional interpretation of such).

### **Impact of the RAE**

28. There was an overwhelming message that the impact of the RAE was pervasive throughout the system. However, views were polarised between research-intensive institutions and the rest of the sector. The notion of selectivity was generally accepted as necessary to continue to support excellence, although there was some concern expressed about the current steepness of the curve.

29. Part of the impact of the RAE was held to be its influence over the nature and timing of appointments. There was a widespread belief that most appointments are made on the basis of capability to undertake research – often defined in RAE terms. Examples were given where interview

---

panels asked whether some elements of current research could be completed in time for submission in the next round of the RAE. Further examples were cited of high profile research-active staff being recruited just in advance of the RAE, and given the benefit of little or no teaching or administrative responsibility to ensure quantifiable outputs for the assessment exercise. The question was raised as to whether rolling assessment might address such distortions.

30. Wide variations in institutional/departmental interpretation of RAE criteria were apparent in the discussion groups, with the misconceptions and misunderstanding of such policies often the source of negative experiences. For example:

- It was believed that some RAE panels had a standard hierarchical ranking of journals to which RAE publications should be submitted for the highest ratings.
- There appeared to be considerable difference in interpretation of the RAE guidelines on publication submissions between institutions and disciplines. The difference in interpreting the ideal as '*up to* four publications' and the desire '*to have* four publications' created real tension. Those from science-based disciplines argued that such criteria were too restrictive and they would wish to submit more. Others indicated that it was difficult to achieve four publications early in a career, and that other criteria (indicating improvement of skills or other contributions) might enable them to produce perhaps fewer publications but of substantially higher quality.
- Institutional decisions about who and where to submit staff also tended to cause some concern. Examples were given of departments being realigned with different Units of Assessment (UoAs) to generate a higher RAE score, and also instances where younger and less experienced staff were submitted in other, lower-rated departments to optimise ratings.
- Participants felt that there was a lack of transparency in how institutions choose to allocate funds. They acknowledged that this was an institutional matter, but would like to see the funding council put forward a recommendation for institutions to make clear the basis on which RAE funds are distributed.
- Younger researchers felt that it was often difficult to publish early in their careers when teaching loads are demanding and there is little time available for research. This was felt to create pressure to publish results earlier than they might otherwise wish. One group argued that the RAE had a decidedly distorting effect as a result of encouraging individualism rather than collaboration, and by focusing on 'outputs' rather than quality of the research culture. This was also felt to be putting pressure on the quality of teaching.

31. Participants believed that current policy created a very competitive system that inhibited interdisciplinary and collaborative work. This competitiveness was felt to favour established

---

researchers and research topics, leaving little space for truly innovative activities. This was felt strongly by those in the emerging disciplines and those from less research-intensive institutions.

32. The administrative burden of the RAE (along with the Teaching Quality Assessment – TQA) was viewed as excessive and too time consuming. Participants felt that it would be beneficial if the administration and outcomes from the two exercises could be streamlined in some fashion. There was also a sense of inequity between the RAE, which promoted and rewarded excellence, and the TQA, which was unhelpful in terms of institutions not striving for teaching excellence. A more holistic or synergistic assessment regime was strongly recommended and many participants expressed support for recommendations that funding should be linked to TQA outcomes.

33. Further points about the RAE included:

- The short-term nature of the RAE does not allow for the development of long-term research objectives.
- The RAE tends not to encourage collaborative research or multidisciplinary research.
- The RAE influences where academics choose to publish, but journals with high impact factors were not necessarily where the majority of readers were.
- Participants stated that they felt there was a lack of flexibility in not being able to work and publish in areas related to their primary UoA. This may simply be a lack of understanding of the current policy or the result of poor institutional interpretation of the policy.
- Participants felt it would be helpful to develop some mechanism that took into consideration research in more applied contexts including research or consultancy undertaken for industry.
- It was also held that there needs to be increased transparency of the RAE processes and criteria to ensure objectivity.
- It was suggested that there should be a more even distribution of research funding, for example by implementing a fractional marking scheme.
- It was suggested that the use of publications as a key assessment indicator does not adequately reflect the breadth of work undertaken in the various disciplines nor the other outputs that often result when undertaking applied research.

- 
- It was also suggested that RAE panels could give extra weighting when considering submissions from individuals who are new to research or submitting for the first time.
  - There should be better assessment processes for practitioner and practice-based research. Panels might consider locally set research criteria (as with the TQA) rather than using universal criteria as present.
  - The RAE should put less focus on short-term measurable outputs and consider work undertaken over a research career.
  - Detailed information should be provided about how the ratings are arrived at. Those with low grades should be given feedback to advise them how to improve.

### **Equal opportunities**

34. One of the points often raised was that the composition of the Steering Group for the Fundamental Review was not representative of gender, ethnic origin, external organisations (unions, NGOs) or the breadth of different types of institution. It was suggested that the lack of such representation could result in potentially inequitable outcomes that would maintain the status quo. One group suggested that there was little evidence of action on the part of HEFCE to address equal opportunities concerns.

35. There was also felt to be an imbalance of representation in the composition of the RAE panels – it was suggested that they neither adequately reflected the different stages of a research career nor different types of institution.

36. Participants felt that RAE policies should make allowances for periods of maternity *and* paternity leave. The Wellcome Trust's policy was noted and suggested as good practice in supporting those wishing to take career breaks. More flexibility would also be welcome to provide RAE assessable outputs for women who undertake laboratory-based research, as they are not allowed into laboratories when pregnant. The point was made that institutions were investing a great deal in training women researchers and that the sector should make the most of the investment through ensuring suitable policies were in place to enable them to make a continuing contribution.

37. One group felt strongly that HEFCE should undertake an internal audit of policy and practice relating to equal opportunities to see how well embedded such policies are within the organisation. They believed that the conception of equal opportunities as portrayed through the funding council was too narrow and should incorporate broader issues such as class, gender, nationality, age and minority/ethnic representation.

---

38. Other equal opportunities issues raised included:

- Concern that equal opportunities in research is not one of the headline issues for the Fundamental Review.
- The suggestion was put forward for positive discrimination in favour of women and other groups under-represented at senior levels.
- It was suggested that, in some instances, senior staff tended to take undue credit when submitting research results. The subsequent discussion explored whether such examples were related to gender or seniority.
- The question was raised as to how HEFCE is addressing inequity in pay for researchers and the fact that there are more women on short-term contracts than men.
- Participants felt that more new staff should be represented on HEFCE committees.
- Age restrictions on grant applications and post-doctoral fellowships were seen to be inequitable.

#### **Relationship between teaching and research**

39. It was widely held that the current funding system was increasing the diversity of institutions. It was felt that such a 'polarisation' of institutions meant that there was not a level playing field in terms of provision of support for teaching and research. There was some, very limited, support for the creation of teaching-only or research-only institutions. However, the majority were against creating such a two-tier system. There was strong support for institutions engaging in both teaching and research to create dynamism in the sector. However, there was concern about the system being able to support quality across the board in both.

40. Many participants felt that in practice research and teaching competed against one another for resources. An analysis of institutional practice would be welcomed to identify what is *actually* happening across institutions in terms of both policy and practice. Institutional guidelines on how to address the tensions between teaching and research would be welcome, with the corollary that the funding council would need to provide incentives to ensure that practice changed.

41. There was a concern that professionally and practice-based teaching could become devalued because institutions hired individuals on the basis of RAE assessable activities. The professional disciplines (e.g. management, medicine and law) needed to draw on these other external activities to inform both teaching and research.

---

42. There was considerable support for the HEFCE and the Quality Assurance Agency to streamline the quality assurance and assessment systems and represent 'joined-up thinking' so that rewards were consistent and the values for both activities were more balanced.

43. Other issues raised relating to the teaching/research interface included:

- The general agreement that research should enhance and strengthen teaching, but that the present system does not encourage this. This was a particular problem in those institutions where researchers had high teaching loads.
- Ability in either teaching or research did not necessarily mean an ability in the other. Human resource policy should provide support and training to underpin activities in both areas.
- One group called for incentives to shift what they saw as a valuing of research over teaching. The group felt that research into teaching (with the RAE accepting the development of academic texts and curriculum material across the disciplines) should be given weight in a revised system.

#### **Collaborative activities**

44. The perception of some participants was that the current funding model created a climate of competitiveness that did not encourage collaborative activities within or across institutions. It was suggested that this competitiveness meant that it was easier to collaborate with partners outside the sector, such as industry or the NHS. Generally, it was felt that collaboration with colleagues in other HEIs, especially overseas, was often easier than within the same institution. Distribution of resources and recognition for research outputs were presented as two areas of contention that could undermine collaborative approaches.

45. There was strong general support for incentives to develop and enhance collaboration between high- and low-rated departments, to build research capacity. Nevertheless, the real difficulties in such collaboration were acknowledged.

46. It was felt that barriers to successful collaborative working tend to be discipline specific, and these were often linked to some of the factors felt to inhibit career development. Examples cited included access to equipment, which is nominally available on a 'collaborative' or shared basis, but where access may be prevented by cost. It was also felt that new researchers, without established reputations, could find it difficult to obtain access to such facilities. This experience was felt to be less common in more research-intensive departments and institutions.

---

47. There was some support for the notion of identifying a proportion of research funding to act as an incentive to undertake more collaborative research activity. It was felt that even small sums of funding applied in this way would facilitate collaborative activity and make newer researcher more 'attractive' as a collaborating partner. It was recognised that use of such funding would need to be closely aligned to departmental and institutional research strategies.

48. Pressure to seek external funding through collaboration with industry was raised by participants as an issue. Some felt that innovative or autonomous research was being jeopardised when institutions had to look to industry to support a significant proportion of the research effort. There was some concern that research undertaken in collaboration with industry did not fit with the RAE. There were also issues around intellectual property rights, conflict between industrial/consulting values and scholarly expectations, and constraints on publishing that provided further hurdles to building a research portfolio.

### **Disciplinary issues**

49. As previously noted, the discussion groups were deliberately constructed to be heterogeneous. This means that disciplinary differences were explored, but the 'weight' of views could not be quantified. Therefore, an analysis of the questionnaire returns, by discipline, was undertaken to determine whether any particular issues were unique to the different groupings.

50. Perhaps not surprisingly, there was significant agreement on two main issues facing new research staff across the HE sector. The first was the lack of balance between the demands of teaching and research (and other administrative duties). This differed only in that the majority of responses in the sciences wished for remission from teaching so that they could concentrate on research, whereas in the arts and humanities the more general call was for 'better balance'. Some science-base respondents felt that the pressure to succeed in both the RAE and TQA was detrimental to those in the early stages of a research career. It was suggested that a strategy needed to be developed to allow for more feasible joint teaching/research positions with equal valuing of the two activities.

51. The second area of broad agreement was the lack of money available to support newer research staff, which then led to increasing casualisation and discontinuity in career development. Related to this was the perceived lack of institutional strategies to provide support and training to enable them to make meaningful contributions.

52. Some participants from the post-92 institutions argued that selectivity was limiting research growth and there was a need to nurture new universities through collaborative research or other incentives. This went hand-in-hand with calls from those in the arts and humanities to 'balance excellence and diversity' while minimising the 'punitive effects of selectivity'. Those in the arts and humanities felt they were less valued than researchers in other disciplines, and point to the lower level of funding as

---

evidence. A significant number of respondents in this group, particularly those from the art and design areas, called for an increased recognition of practice-based and pedagogical research in the RAE.

## **Conclusion**

53. There was widespread support for the HEFCE in undertaking such a consultation. And it was hoped that the findings of the consultation exercise would be made available to them in some form.

54. Generally, attendees felt unrewarded, under pressure and in many cases undervalued. Most participants were enthusiastic about life in higher education, but in some cases their commitment was waning.

55. A clear message was the pressure and stress in having to produce excellence in both teaching and research early in their careers. As teaching commitments were fixed, this often meant that research took place around the working day. Poor human resource management practices were frequently cited, and in particular the fact that too much depended on the approach of individual heads of department or supervisors for the provision of guidance and support. There was evidence that the CVCP Concordat has had some influence in raising awareness of the need for training and support for such staff, but there was little evidence of it having a significant and widespread impact across the sector.