

## For Debate

# RAE: “Realistically Assessed Excellence” or Perhaps “Rigorous Audit of Expertise”?

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*(Received 4 July 2002; In final form 2 October 2002)*

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has been an iterative process since 1992 and few would deny that it has come a long way since its inception. The original goal is still valid; to provide an assessment of research performance in the UK which is robust and which can be used to allocate public funds to resource research in British universities. The four Funding Councils jointly funded the exercise which was administered by the RAE 2001 Team based at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) offices.

One of the key features of the 2001 exercise was the extensive consultation which took place within the community on the content on the submission “RAE 2001: Guidance on Submissions (RAE2/99)” and also on the assessment criteria and working methods “RAE 2001: Assessment Panels’ Criteria and Working Methods (RAE 5/99)”. All 60 panels spent much time during 1999 preparing consultation papers and then reviewing the product of these consultations. The end result was a clear and transparent process which would be followed during the exercise proper and in practice this worked very well.

Composition of Panels had been an active area for discussion and disagreement after the 1996 exercise and RAE 2001 worked hard to achieve balanced representation for the different constituencies within each Unit of Assessment (UoA). In particular industrial participation was sought and in the case of pharmacy was very well achieved. In comparison with the 1996 panel, the total membership increased from 8 to 13, two of whom were from industry and

there were two observers rather than the five in 1996. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) and the Medical Research Council were the two organisations represented with observers in each exercise indicating their strong interest in the pharmacy research base. Pharmacy Practice representation increased from one member to three. Each of the pharmaceutical sciences was well represented. The increased number of panel members reflected the expected amount of the workload and its sectoral distribution and probably increased the willingness of individuals to serve on the panel. Certainly the 1996 panel had a very heavy workload. In this exercise, the panel reviewed a high proportion of the outputs submitted, in many cases more than 50%, and took advice where appropriate.

A number of initiatives were suggested by the panel and implemented in the exercise. They included a preliminary assessment of each submission by each panel member before the review session and also the specialist reviews on each submission were circulated before the review meeting. This effective prework ensured that the actual assessment process was well informed and could be conducted efficiently. It undoubtedly required panel members to do more work but all agreed that this made for a more efficient process.

In terms of process, the 2001 exercise achieved its goals of wide consultation and transparency alongside broad representation on the panel which were refinements based on the 1996 review.

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Twelve Institutions submitted to UoA9, slightly down on the previous exercise and reflects decisions made in Universities based on possible or expected outcomes in all possible UoAs. These are political decisions within institutions and as such should not influence the range of UoAs but clearly relates to the amount of possible cross panel assessment. In the case of pharmacy, a multidisciplinary subject, this is an area which will require careful attention. The breadth of experience within the panel meant that in 2001 there was little need for cross panel assessment and the wide range of underpinning science were both evident and appreciated. Pharmacy is a discipline in which many science and practice elements are integrated and this is widely appreciated by potential employers in academia, industry and practice related areas as well as by graduates who see many professional opportunities.

In an attempt to address the perennial criticism that there was variation between panels an "Umbrella Panel", consisting of the Chairs of the Life Science related panels met on a number of occasions to ensure that there was consistency of approach and assessment between their respective panels. This process had been trialled in 1996 and was extended in the 2001 process. The general feeling was that it had been very beneficial and should be carried forward.

The overview report of UoA9 attempts to show the strong areas across pharmacy, those of chemistry, pharmacology and the rapidly developing practice areas, but also to highlight opportunities for change. Classical pharmaceuticals and pharmaceutical technology are areas where there was not a clear development path in a number of the submissions, and as this is a key area for both research and its applications academia needs to consider this comment. In addition, the age profile in a number of departments requires that suitable planning should have a high priority within some Universities to maintain the high standing and productivity of pharmacy that was recognised and reported on by the panel.

In any audit process, it is likely that participants who are dissatisfied with the result will seek to assign blame on the process, panellists, administrators or the overall exercise rather than admit to any personal liability. This seems to be human nature but in this instance the process was clear, transparent and robust and in the main seemed to work well. It is essential that an effective audit process is in place to assure the wider community that research money is being spent appropriately and it is likely that the active debate on which process should be used will continue within the community for some considerable time to come.