

Joint Funding Councils

Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes

Final Report

Response by the National Postgraduate Committee

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On behalf of the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) I am pleased to respond to the joint funding bodies consultation paper on research assessment. This was discussed at a meeting of the NPC held on 3rd November 2002 at the University of Cardiff. I am grateful for the supporting comments conveyed by the NPC for this consultation.

Tim Brown
General Secretary
National Postgraduate Committee

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Executive summary

We welcome the report, which brings forward performance indicators that have had our consultation and response in the past. They are clearly an identity of vast improvements that are necessary in a number of institutions across the country to help combat the numerous, often unseen, difficulties that are experienced by research students. We also raise concerns as to how the performance indicators will be implemented, particularly in smaller or emerging research units, which have limited funding and resources. At present we see that this is going to require careful review of institutions both from a self-assessment and auditing from the funding bodies.

Preamble

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) is a charity with the aim of furthering UK postgraduate education in the public interest. We organise meetings and conferences, publish best practice guidelines and seek to influence public policy on all aspects of postgraduate education. Our membership consists of affiliated students' unions from across the UK; we have one full-time officer, the General Secretary, and fourteen voluntary officers. We work closely with the National Union of Students and the lecturers' unions as well as other bodies relevant to postgraduate education.

Responses to the Suggested Assessment Methods

In response to the questions sent to us by Mr Will Naylor of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, our answers are as follows:

Should there be

- a) hard objective standards which all institutions should have to meet or***
- b) a more flexible system in which HEFCE advises institutions on ways of improving their RDPs using the framework as a reference point?***

We support the framework as a helpful guideline with standards that reflect an effective system to support the needs of research students. However, we consider that setting the standards to institutions is possibly optimistic for some to be able to reach with funding limitations. Nonetheless we feel this will still cause many institutions to improve considerably without making unreasonable improvements even if minimum standards are not met.

As a method of implementing these standards we would suggest that institutions will need to use the standards to devise an action plan for possible improvements with regard to the standards set. We would recommend also that institutions are possibly audited to ensure that their plans for improvement are reasonable and within the possible finance and resource limitations they have.

It is concerning that funding will be a limit to smaller institutions and those with lower RAE rating if standards result in being weak. Therefore the funding sources may prove helpful to enhance the standards and allow such institutions meet the minimum standards.

In terms of whether to chose (a) or (b) to the above question, it may be the case that research units with higher funding may have little excuse not to meet required standards and so the

framework may have to be applied more strictly in such cases. For smaller and emerging research units the framework may require more flexibility. Therefore we would say both answers could be correct depending on the circumstances.

Should QAA be involved in the processes? Should it be part of an institutional review?

From the previous question we agree that an external assessment would be necessary to measure the standards met by an institution. The framework setting standards of minimum and good practise does provide a helpful guideline to compare achievement between research units. Integrating this into other audit processes would prove time efficient and helpful. As a student body we would strongly recommend that a student feedback process from research students in differing disciplines was included in the audit process.

What should happen to institutions deemed to be failing?

We support, from answering the first question, that appropriate support may be required for emerging or smaller research units that have limitations so that funding mechanisms or support systems are in place to help them reach the standards required. Although such research units may be deemed failing because of low RAE rating and limited funding, there are still other qualities they otherwise might have and could therefore be built upon.

Such research units do, however, limit access to the research quality or “critical mass” of research so it is vital that research students gain access to this. In such circumstances, it is vital that appropriate networks are in place for such students to access and learn from people active in the wider research community.

HEFCE funds research highly selectively on the basis of research assessment and funds teaching at a standard rate subject to quality assurance. Which model is more appropriate for research degree programmes? Is there a third option?

RAE rating more specifically defines the quality of research in a unit, which will come from the quality of the researchers and the people heading the research. This has little relation the quality of support for students learning to research so therefore it is likely that research units with high ratings will fail to meet many of the standards in the framework. Teaching quality is another matter related to teaching presented to taught students, who are approached completely differently to that of research students.

We would therefore not support the idea that teaching quality assessments would be able to indicate the quality of research degree programmes and there would be confusion caused if the RAE rating took such factors into account. We would therefore suggest a third option to be the most appropriate.