

## Review of research assessment: response from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

Corporate response (representing the views of the group or organisation): Yes  
Private response (representing the views of one or more individuals): No

### Contact in case of queries:

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### **Recommendation 1 (see paragraphs 113-116 of the review)**

Any system of research assessment designed to identify the best research must be based upon the judgement of experts who may, if they choose, employ performance indicators to inform their judgement.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 1? Place a cross beside the appropriate answer:

|                            |                      |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Strongly agree             | ...                  |
| Agree                      | ...                  |
| Neither agree nor disagree | ...                  |
| Disagree                   | ...                  |
| Strongly disagree          | x ( in current form) |

#### Comments on recommendation 1:

This is phrased too strongly. Clearly experts have a central role but they also need to be accountable. Performance indicators should be used, at least to see whether experts are behaving in a consistent and accountable fashion. Experts must provide justifications for judgements contrary to the performance indicators.

Best research might be interpreted as most successful in which case stakeholders are important as well as experts.

There is little mention of how to manage accountability in the paper or the consultation.

**Recommendation 2 (see paragraphs 117-126 of the review)**

- a. There should be a six-year cycle.
- b. There should be a light-touch 'mid-point monitoring'. This would be designed only to highlight significant changes in the volume of activity in each unit.
- c. The next assessment process should take place in 2007-8.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 2? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a | x              |       |                            |          |                   |
| Point b |                |       |                            | x        |                   |
| Point c | x              |       |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 2:

This is sensible except that those in receipt of the most money (5\* and 6\*) should have a heavier touch midpoint review as so much public funds are involved. In addition, where a subject is expanding or contracting rapidly at an institution or across the system, a re-evaluation may be necessary. Thus we strongly agree with one or more "between point" reviews but feel that it should go further in a small number of specific cases. Consider the problems of having waited 6 years to see whether research into transistors or later into microprocessors was going to take off in the past (as maybe the UK did to its cost).

There is thus a need for some midpoint action between now and 2006/7 and it is important that it identifies subjects in decline or growth and makes adjustments.

**Recommendation 3 (see paragraphs 127-133 of the review)**

- a. There should be an institution-level assessment of research competences, undertaken approximately two years before the main assessment.
- b. The competences to be assessed should be institutional research strategy, development of researchers, equal opportunities, and dissemination beyond the peer group.
- c. An institution failing its assessment against any one of the competencies would be allowed to enter the next research assessment but would not receive funding on the basis of its performance in that assessment until it had demonstrated a satisfactory performance.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 3? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a | x              |       |                            |          |                   |
| Point b | x              |       |                            |          |                   |
| Point c |                | x     |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 3:  
Largely in agreement but see below (4).

**Recommendation 4 (see paragraphs 134-155 of the review)**

- a. There should, in principle, be a multi-track assessment enabling the intensiveness of the assessment activity (and potentially the degree of risk) to be proportionate to the likely benefit.
- b. The least research intensive institutions should be considered separately from the remainder of the HE sector.
- c. The form of the assessment of the least research intensive institutions would be a matter for the relevant funding council.
- d. The less competitive work in the remainder of institutions should be assessed by proxy measures against a threshold standard.
- e. The most competitive work should be assessed using an expert review assessment similar to the old Research Assessment Exercise.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 4? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a |                |       |                            | x        |                   |
| Point b |                |       |                            | x        |                   |
| Point c |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point d |                |       |                            | x        |                   |
| Point e |                | x     |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 4: This makes joint submissions hard to handle. Proposals for concentration of research into a more limited number of institutions, as presented in the review, are very likely to adversely affect research capacity in new and developing areas such as learning technology research. The proposal would fossilise UK research. Clearly we are not alone in these concerns; we would second the reservations expressed on behalf of UUK: "The value-added of UK research as currently distributed is great. Where is the evidence that concentrating it all on a few universities would be more successful?" (Roderick Floud, quoted in MacLeod, 2003). We would endorse the position of the Royal Society which, in an earlier submission to the Roberts review, has already called for an unequivocal halt to the trend towards greater selectivity.

Furthermore, we welcome the review recommendation 9c, i.e. that the funding councils should consider what measures could be taken to make joint submissions more straightforward for institutions. Indeed, ALT would seem ideally placed to play a UK-wide brokering role for distributed learning technology researchers wishing to enter the next RAE as part of a joint submission. Reward systems should encourage research in areas where activity is starting, growth is rapid, and economic and social rewards potentially high, and in which research excellence may be "buried" within, or spread between, disciplines, sectors, business and institutions. If, as the review suggested, research assessment is to be linked to informing other funding processes such as third stream funding, then there must be no under-assessed units even if financial reward does not follow immediately. We want research to relate to other areas and so there cannot be opting out. The alternative of ensuring that we conduct excellent, world leading research at the forefront of knowledge, by a continuing concentration on a smaller number of institutions with large sums of money in mainly declining areas of student and other stakeholder demand for knowledge, that are of sufficiently small interest that the UK has few competitors, needs actively to be discouraged.

#### **Recommendation 5 (see paragraphs 156-171 of the review)**

- a. The output of the Research Quality Assessment should be a 'quality profile' indicating the quantum of 'one star', 'two star' and 'three star' research in each submission. It will not be the role of the assessment to reduce this profile to summary metrics or grades.
- b. As a matter of principle, star ratings would not be given to named individuals, nor would the profile be published if the submission were sufficiently small that individual performance could be inferred from it.
- c. Panels would be given guidelines on expected proportions of three star, two star and one star ratings. These proportions should normally be the same for each unit of assessment. If a panel awarded grades which were more or less generous than anticipated in the guidelines, these grades would have to be confirmed through moderation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This consultation question reflects an edited version of recommendation 5. The recommendation in the review report also states that 'the funding councils should provide institutions with details of the relative value, in funding terms, of one star, two star, and three star research, and of research fundable through the Research Capacity Assessment in advance of the assessment. These ratios might vary between disciplines.' In the event that the review recommendations are accepted, each funding council will develop its own policies for reflecting the assessment results in funding, taking proper account of Sir Gareth's recommendation.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 5? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point b |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point c |                | x     |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 5:

Point c is important here. It is vital to recognise emerging areas by having approximately the same star distribution as in established ones. Otherwise conservatism and fossilisation will continue to dominate strategies. The idea of mature subjects having higher standards should be eschewed.

**Recommendation 6 (see paragraphs 172-197 of the review)**

- a. There should be between 20 and 25 units of assessment panels supported by around 60 sub-panels. Panels and sub-panels should be supported by colleges of assessors with experience of working in designated multidisciplinary ‘thematic’ areas.
- b. Each panel should have a chair and a moderator. The role of the moderator would be to ensure consistency of practice across the sub-panels within the unit of assessment.
- c. Each panel should include a number of non-UK based researchers with experience of the UK research system.
- d. The moderators of adjacent panels should meet in five or six ‘super-panels’ whose role would be to ensure consistency of practice between panels. These ‘super-panels’ should be chaired by senior moderators who would be individuals with extensive experience in research.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 6? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a | x              |       |                            |          |                   |
| Point b |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point c |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point d |                | x     |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 6: This is in part in conflict with 1 which implies that experts can do as they wish with PIs.

It is important that one sub-panel specifically addresses e-learning research. The e-learning research community is well established, having centres with a 25-year history; however, as a field of study, it has not been recognised in previous Research Assessment Exercises and is treated as if it were still in its infancy. The growing body of research into the deployment of technologies to facilitate learning is evidence that a credible discipline is arising, described more fully in ALT's response to the HEFCE Strategy 2003-2008, ([http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/HEFCE\\_2003\\_2008\\_strategy\\_final.doc](http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/HEFCE_2003_2008_strategy_final.doc)). This discipline is not a simple application of computer science to education or vice versa. Instead, it is a truly interdisciplinary field of study, blending findings, methods and perspectives from psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy, media studies, science & technology studies and economics, as well as education and computer science. Researchers in the e-learning community come from a variety of backgrounds: relationships with technologists and with educationalists are being established based on mutual trust and recognition. Sound research remains an essential precursor for the development and deployment of effective educational systems and e-learning products, and that this research-based approach must be fostered within the UK. Dual funding initiatives such as the recent workshop, organised jointly by EPSRC, DfES, ESRC and e-Science should be supported within the review. We note with concern that improved linkage with European and international initiatives is not given sufficient prominence.

**Recommendation 7 (see paragraphs 198-204 of the review)**

- a. The rule that each researcher may only submit up to four items of research output should be abolished. Research Quality Assessment panels should have the freedom to define their own limits on the number and/or size of research outputs associated with each researcher or group.
- b. Research Quality Assessment panels should ensure that their criteria statements enable them to guarantee that practice-based and applicable research are assessed according to criteria which reflect the characteristics of excellence in those types of research in those disciplines.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 7? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point b | x              |       |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 7:

In addition to its historical strengths, represented by a substantial body of practice-based research, the field of learning technology is now developing its theoretical bases. Because of this broad mix of valued work, we welcome this recognition that practice-based and applicable research should be assessed according to discipline-specific criteria of excellence.

**Recommendation 8 (see paragraphs 205-213 of the review)**

- a. The funding councils should work alongside the subject communities and the research councils to develop discipline-specific performance indicators.
- b. Performance against these indicators should be calculated a year prior to the exercise, and institutions advised of their performance relative to other institutions.
- c. The weight placed upon these indicators as well as their nature should be allowed to vary between panels.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 8? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point b |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point c |                | x     |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 8:

The emphasis on discipline specific criteria is welcome, especially in interdisciplinary cases. In our case there are a number of differences from neighbouring areas – for instance the strong role of online journals as a medium for research output. They are becoming the de facto standard and need to be given special consideration as being of the same standard as printed journals. This would not yet be the case in other more traditional disciplines such as education.

**Recommendation 9 (see paragraphs 214-234 of the review)**

- a. Where an institution submits to Research Quality Assessment in a sub-unit of assessment all staff in that sub-unit should become ineligible for the Research Capacity Assessment, even if they are not included in the Research Quality Assessment submission.
- b. The funding councils should establish and promote a facility for work to be submitted as the output of a group rather than an individual where appropriate.
- c. The funding councils should consider what measures could be taken to make joint submission more straightforward for institutions.
- d. Where an institution submits a sub-unit of assessment for Research Quality Assessment, no fewer than 80% of the qualified staff contracted to undertake research within the sub-unit of assessment must be included in the submission.
- e. All staff eligible to apply for grants from the research councils should be eligible for submission to Research Quality Assessment.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 9? Please indicate your views using the grid below:

|         | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Point a |                |       | x                          |          |                   |
| Point b | x              |       |                            |          |                   |
| Point c | x              |       |                            |          |                   |
| Point d |                | x     |                            |          |                   |
| Point e |                | x     |                            |          |                   |

Comments on recommendation 9:

Point c – it is insufficient to consider – action is urgently required before it is quietly forgotten.

See other recommendations. The key is that in some disciplines a lot of staff are part time and it is important that that be taken into account in calculating headcounts and proportions. Indeed there may be a case for everyone's time being so divided. It would constitute good practice for accountability and transparency. For example, a high proportion of staff in the e-learning area are female, on fixed-term contracts, and likely to have career breaks. Thus any discrimination in the current model will apply particularly strongly to e-learning.



**Recommendation 10 (see paragraphs 235-238 of the review)**

Each panel should consider a research strategy statement outlining the institution's plans for research at unit level.

Do you agree or disagree with recommendation 10? Place a cross beside the appropriate answer:

- Strongly agree ...
- Agree **x...**
- Neither agree nor disagree ...
- Disagree ...
- Strongly disagree ...

Comments on recommendation 10: none

**Question 11 Burden for institutions**

The review proposals have been designed to make the burden of assessment proportionate with the possibility of financial reward. Do you agree that this has been achieved? Place a cross by the appropriate answer:

- Strongly agree ...
- Agree **x...**
- Neither agree nor disagree ...
- Disagree ...
- Strongly disagree ...

Comments on question 11 – burden for institutions:  
Given that this is the only significant determinant of funds, it is clear that institutions will put a lot of effort in regardless. This will be made worse if other funds such as third leg funding are related.

### Question 12 Value of research assessment

What value do you place on the research assessment if the financial reward is likely to be small? Place a cross by the appropriate answer:

|        |      |
|--------|------|
| High   | ...  |
| Medium | x... |
| Low    | ...  |

Comments on question 12 – value of research assessment:

Research assessment – value high – it is an essential part of ensuring that stakeholders get VFM for public funds.

“The” research assessment – value lower – the credibility if it does not apply fairly to all will diminish its value to stakeholders and institutions.

### Question 13 Equality of opportunity for all groups of staff

The funding councils wish to promote equality of opportunity for all staff regardless of age, sexual orientation, political belief, disability, gender, race or religion and seek to ensure that its research assessment policies are compatible with this objective. How successful do you consider that the proposals of the research assessment review are in this respect? Place a cross by the appropriate answer:

|                                     |      |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| Very successful                     | ...  |
| Successful                          | ...  |
| Neither successful nor unsuccessful | ...  |
| Unsuccessful                        | x... |
| Very unsuccessful                   | ...  |

Comments on question 13 – equality of opportunity for all groups of staff:

While it will be successful in many ways there is a potential underlying flaw which causes secondary ageist and gender biases.

As already noted, learning technology research is interdisciplinary. As with other interdisciplinary fields, it is increasingly conducted by distributed teams, often of part time workers (sometimes very part time), supported by technology. This trend in research work has been noticed and is being supported, for instance in Canada. Accordingly we welcome the idea presented in the report for ‘thematic panels which would provide a focus for interdisciplinary communities which have become established within the sector’ – as a way of taking such ideas forward. We take the view that there is now a large volume of work that reflects the excellence to be found in the area of learning technology.

However, we remain very concerned that methodologies will remain in place that reward universities for staying and especially “concentrating” in declining disciplines, with full time,

campus based, institutionally focussed, monastic style researchers. This discriminates, in a secondary fashion in a number of ways, for instance against females. It also has strongly detrimental long-term consequences for the UK economy (specifically not a concern of the RAE).

Whatever their affiliation and however funded, we need to expand the number of researchers in learning technology and e-learning. This implies further distribution of the research workforce – we need to identify and encourage the evolution of communities of research practice and then encourage, support, and reward them appropriately. That implies being fair to them in the process.

#### **Question 14 Overall approach of the review**

Notwithstanding your views on any specific recommendations, and given the responses to the earlier 'Invitation to contribute', do you agree or disagree with the broad approach taken by the review to the question of research assessment? Place a cross by the appropriate answer:

|                            |      |
|----------------------------|------|
| Strongly agree             | ...  |
| Agree                      | ...  |
| Neither agree nor disagree | x... |
| Disagree                   | ...  |
| Strongly disagree          | ...  |

Comments on question 14 – overall approach of the review:

It is not possible to make any general endorsement without reference to the specific recommendations made earlier.

#### **Question 15 Further comments**

Question 15 – any further comments: none

<http://www.alt.ac.uk/> 19/9/2003