

Annex A

Review of research assessment: response form

Please complete and return as a Word attachment to an e-mail, to responses@ra-review.ac.uk. The deadline for responses is 30 September 2003.

Response by (name of person or organisation): Scientists for Labour
(prepared by Dr David Lee, Queen Mary, University of London on behalf of Scientists for Labour)

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

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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 | X |
| Agree | ... |
| Neither agree nor disagree | ... |
| Disagree | ... |
| Strongly disagree | ... |

Comments on recommendation 1:

Scientists for Labour (SfL) strongly believes that assessment of research quality should be based, primarily, on the judgement of experts in the relevant field. It should be noted that these experts should represent the relevant research community and as such should always include reviewers who are based overseas, to provide an international perspective on research quality.

SfL acknowledges that performance indicators may play a useful role in informing the judgement of experts but believe that they should not be used as the primary basis for the assessment of research quality.

SfL is concerned that performance indicators may be particularly inappropriate for broad units of assessment. As an example patterns of publication and journal impact factors can vary widely across sub-disciplines submitting to a single unit of assessment, and this is particularly true in the very broadly-based medical UoAs. The use of crude metrics can unreasonable penalise research within specific sub-disciplines. Accordingly experts should use these indicators with care when determining relative research quality.

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:

a). SfL strongly believes that a 6-year cycle is too short. This view is based both on the general time-scale for strategic research developments to come to fruition within departments and on the additional complexity and bureaucracy associated with the proposed new structure for research assessment. The timeline suggested in the Roberts report suggests that Institutions may submit to a mid-term review at year 3, submit evidence of Institutional competence at year 4, submit performance indicators at year 5 and final submission of complete RQA documentation at year 6. Institutions will necessarily perform internal 'dry runs' for each of these submissions. As such the assessment process will run continually over the entire 6 year period. SfL believes that this is counter to the overall goals of Institutions which will have to divert resources from other important strategic activities. A minimum cycle of 7 years is suggested.

b). SfL supports, in principle, light-touch 'mid-point monitoring' in selected areas where activity has altered significantly. This is particularly important where new initiatives have been established which would otherwise not benefit until after a subsequent full RQA. SfL believes that this approach should be designed to provide benefit and not loss to Institutions and that the decision to participate in mid-point monitoring should be taken by the Institutions not by the RQA authorities.

c). Based on the comments in section a), the next assessment process should not take place before 2008-9.

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:

- a). SfL agrees that the assessment of competence at an Institutional level is important as failings in this area clearly affect the ability of individual researchers and groups to achieve optimal productivity and output. It is unclear, however, why this assessment should be made in advance of the final RQA/RCA exercises. This point is related to c) below.
- b). The competencies proposed are reasonable.
- c). SfL strongly opposes the proposal to with-hold funding should an institution fail its assessment against any one of the competencies. This overly draconian measure would act to penalise individual research groups on the basis of institutional failing over which they may have no control. This point is particularly significant for large institutions with devolved control and semi-autonomous sections, often associated with mergers. To block funding to research groups across the whole institution would be seen as unjust and de-motivating to successful research activity. While some sanction or penalty is needed to ensure that institutions do meet these competencies, they need to be carefully considered so as to encourage positive outcomes, and not merely to inflict damage. The proposal above is a crude and blunt instrument.

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:

a) SfL agrees that the intensiveness of the assessment activity (and potentially the degree of risk) to be proportionate to the likely benefit. However the decision should be taken by the Institution rather than the assessment authorities or funding council.

b). SfL strongly opposes this approach which runs counter to the basic principle that 'those who are assessed control their input into the process: submissions are put together by Institutions'. The suggestion that an Institution en-bloc should be removed from the process is divisive and will not encourage low ranking institution to support isolated pockets of excellence which may exist. No institution should be prevented from submitting to the RQA or RCA if they believe it to be in their interests.

c). SfL very strongly opposes this recommendation. As outlined above the proposal runs counter to the basic approach that an Institution has autonomy over what and how it submits to the exercise. To permit research councils or any other external body to decide whether an Institution is permitted to submit to the RQA/RCA is unacceptable. Research active groups within low ranking institutions could be submitted through rival institutions. However this is likely to be on terms dictated by the recipient institution and will do nothing to encourage the

host institution to increase their research activity. It is unlikely, therefore, that an institution which is prevented en-bloc from submitting to the RQA/RCA will achieve the necessary threshold to be included in subsequent assessment exercises. Accordingly, it is the view of SfL that this proposal could create teaching-only institutions from the top down.

d). SfL supports this recommendation. However for the dual assessment strategy to work, sufficient funding must be provided through the RCA route.

e). SfL strongly supports this recommendation.

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.¹

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:

a). SfL believes that the old banding system caused major problems and resulting in significant 'game playing'. Accordingly, SfL strongly supports the proposal to introduce a continual grading.

b). SfL agrees that star ratings should not be openly given to named individuals. However, this aspiration may be unrealistic as individual performance is likely to be inferred from the overall result.

c). This recommendation highlights a major inconsistency in the approach adopted in the Roberts review. The proposals suggest a relative assessment, with, broadly, the same

¹ 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.

proportion of three-star two-star and one-star ratings awarded by each panel.

This approach is suggested as it would prevent grade inflation. It is unclear to SfL why grade inflation is undesirable, provided it reflects a real improvement in research quality rather than better 'game playing'. In our response to the Science and Technology committee Inquiry into the Research Assessment Exercise SfL indicated that it believed that the RAE had been successful in its goal of improving the quality of research in UK University departments over the period 1992-2001. This view is supported by the Roberts report and SfL believe that the assessment exercise should provide an incentive to improve. This incentive will be lost if a relative rather than absolute assessment is adopted.

Moreover there are inconsistencies within the report. In section 101 of the Roberts report it is suggested that three-star two-star and one-star ratings should be defined as top-international, bottom international and top national research respectively. This is an absolute assessment and is fundamentally inconsistent with the suggestion that panels give a similar proportion of each grade (as suggested in section 109).

The major reason for adopting a relative assessment is to prevent a gap between expectation and reality in terms of funding. However in order to achieve this goal absolute measures have to be adopted to run alongside the relative measures. In the proposals these absolute measures relate to funding weighting which will vary between subjects. This is discussed below but appear to SfL to be a major flaw in the proposals as it is likely to be seen as divisive and lacking in transparency.

(response to point d original document). The report seeks to propose a mechanism whereby a clear link exists between assessment outcomes and funding and that the link to be seen as fair. This aspiration is supported by SfL. However we believe that the mechanism proposed will not achieve this aim.

The old system provided an absolute assessment of research quality which was coupled with a relative weighting of funding according to banding, which was determined on the basis of the overall proportion of submissions in each band and the funding available. This approach was reasonably criticised as groups demonstrated an improvement in quality with no increase in funding.

The new system is also problematic as it suggests a relative assessment of research quality which is coupled with funding weighting which must necessarily be based on an absolute assessment of research quality for each panel. For example, to determine whether the overall quality of research in 'neuroscience' is greater than 'cancer studies'. It is unclear how this assessment will be made. It could be based on previous RAE results, but this would risk appearing outdated. Alternatively it could be based on metrics provided prior to the RQA, but this would be a crude mechanism. In effect the assessment exercise will need to be prejudged in overall terms prior to being performed. This major issue must be clarified.

The proposed system also risks 'game playing' which could undermine the clear link between outcome and funding. The funding weightings will be released prior to the exercise.

Accordingly Institutions may choose to switch their submission from one panel to another in order to maximise income. If this occurs in a major way, funding may be insufficient to cover the outcome of the RQA, resulting in post-RQA adjustment of funding weightings. If this occurs the very basis of the proposed mechanism would be undermined.

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:

- a). SfL believes that the need to address multidisciplinary research is crucial. We suggest that multidisciplinary experts should be members of other panels and therefore we propose that a system of formal dual membership should be adopted. This would have the additional benefit of providing a mechanism for moderation between panels.
- b). SfL supports this recommendation.
- c). SfL strongly supports this recommendation. We believe it is essential for international quality research to be assessed by a panel which includes non-UK based members.
- d). SfL supports this recommendation.

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:

a). SfL agrees that panels should have the freedom to adopt their own limits on research output in line with expectation within the specific subject area. Certainly there are differences in the typical quantity of journal publications between different subject areas and this should be reflected.

b). SfL supports this recommendation but limits must be established. It should be emphasised that the assessment exercise is fundamentally a method of distributing money from the Funding Councils to support research. It is, therefore, right to neglect contract research not because it is unworthy but because it should be attracting funding into the department through overheads. Moreover, contract work that involves really interesting innovative results or addresses intriguing scientific or technological questions almost inevitably also leads to publications in peer-review journals, although publication may be delayed due to intellectual property protection priorities. Moreover panels are able to decide for themselves what sort of work they are willing to consider, and those in areas in which much research does not lead to peer reviewed papers can take this into account.

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:

a). SfL accepts the need to use performance indicators as tools to inform experts in the RQA, but the indicators should not replace peer review. However, the performance indicators must be relevant to the specific discipline. Devising appropriate and robust indicators is difficult particularly for broad units of assessment. For example journal impact factors can vary considerable between sub-disciplines which may all be included in a single unit of assessment. This is particularly true in the medical UoAs.

b). The proposals imply that the performance indicators could be used by institutions as a tool to decide between submission to the RCA or RQA. This type of approach is already in place in most institutions and would be strengthened by assessment of performance against the indicators prior to making a final decision about submission to either RQA or RCA. This approach would help institutions make these difficult decisions.

c). As indicated above the nature and importance of performance indicators will, necessarily, differ between panels. In order to best allow institutions to make decisions, details of indicators, and their importance, should be released by panels prior to the final exercise.

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:

a). SfL is unclear whether this recommendation will work in practice. Institutions put together groupings for research assessment purposes, which best meet criteria within subject panels. Increasingly these grouping do not match traditional University departments. Accordingly institutions will exclude individual staff they wish to submit to the RCA from a RQA grouping in order to maximise potential funding. It is unclear how these institutional decisions about RQA and RCA groupings could be challenged. The reality is that institutions will take care to minimise the number of staff who are submitted to either assessment through the careful selection of groupings.

b). SfL accepts this recommendation.

c). SfL accepts this recommendation, particularly in light of the increasing number of established multi-institutional research groups such as Interdisciplinary Research Centres (IRC).

d). See also the response to a) above. SfL is unclear whether this proposal can work in practise nor whether it is desirable. As outlined above institutions will establish groupings that will meet this criterion through careful selection of staff. More importantly the proposed structure appears to suggest a cumulative approach to funding based on the total amount of high-quality research (1*-3*). This being the case there is no financial benefit or penalty for including staff who do not meet this level. This is clearly different from the former RAE structure where submission of staff who did not meet the top criteria could make a significant difference to final funding. If SfL has interpreted the funding mechanisms correctly then the proportion of staff submitted becomes irrelevant and institutions should be left to make their own decisions.

e). SfL accepts this recommendation in principle. However care should be taken not to exclude appropriate staff. For example certain research fellows funded by charitable organisations are ineligible to apply for grants from the research councils despite being at an equivalent level to established academic staff. These researchers should be permitted to be included in the assessment exercise.

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:

SfL accepts this recommendation in principle. However care should be taken to ensure that duplication of submission does not occur. Evidence of institutional level competence, which should include strategic planning, is submitted at year 4. Accordingly the unit level submission at year 6 should provide a summary of developments since year 4 and cover specific unit-level strategy. In turn the submission at year 4 should not cover unit-level information to minimise bureaucracy.

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 | ... |
| Neither agree nor disagree | ... |
| Disagree | X |
| Strongly disagree | ... |

Comments on question 11 – burden for institutions:

Overall SfL does not agree that the burden of assessment is proportionate with the possibility of financial reward. The burden imposed on low ranking institutions will certainly be reduced. However the reward to these institutions will remain very small.

For research active and research led institutions the level of bureaucracy is of concern. The process proposed is considerably more bureaucratic than the existing RAE structure, although the assessment cycle had only been increased by one year. Indeed the structure may require the submission of a substantial body of information in 4 of the 6 years in the cycle, compared to 1 in 5 for the current structure. For the reward to be proportionate a significant increase in funding would be needed.

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 | X |
| Medium | ... |
| Low | ... |

Comments on question 12 – value of research assessment:

SfL believes that the value of the research assessment is great even when financial reward is limited. The RAE exercise allowed institutions to assess the strengths and weaknesses of research in absolute terms and in relation to other institutions. Moreover SfL believes that the RAE contributed to an improvement in the quality of research. Another benefit of the RAE is that it does encourage strategic planning within departments and across University institutions. This may be a major factor in improving research quality.

SfL is concerned that these benefits relate to an assessment of research quality in absolute rather than relative terms. The Roberts review proposes a shift to a relative assessment of quality which risks undermining some of the benefits of the RAE as outlined above.

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 | X |
| Neither successful nor unsuccessful | ... |
| Unsuccessful | ... |
| Very unsuccessful | ... |

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

SfL perceives that the most significant issue in this respect is in relation to staff taking career breaks, for example to have children. This problem is likely to be reduced under the proposed structure, as the performance of an individual will have less potential significance due to the replacement of banding with continual grading.

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:

SfL welcomes a number of the recommendations but have concerns over some major issues as follows:

SfL welcomes:

- The replacement of a banding system with a system of continual grading
- The opportunity to reduce the burden of the exercise by opting for an RCA submission or other mechanism when the likelihood of reward is low.
- The attempt to provide a clear link between outcome and funding
- The attempt to address multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research groups
- The desire to improve consistency across panels

SfL has concerns over:

- The use of a relative assessment system which will undermine some of the benefits of the original RAE system in terms of driving up research quality
- The reliance on a weighting system for funding, which must necessarily be based on an absolute assessment of research quality for each panel. Further details are required and this aspect is likely to prove controversial
- The ability for institutions to 'game-play' after the funding weighting is announced by switching panels etc. This may lead to funding being inadequate to meet expectation, causing resentment greater than for the old RAE where expectation of funding was not so clear
- The suggestion that some institutions will be excluded from the RQA/RCA assessment altogether, with the decision being made by organisations external to the institutions involved

Question 15 Further comments

Question 15 – any further comments: