UK universities

Research gradings stir emotions

BRITISH university departments that received poor marks in the recent University Grants Committee (UGC)'s assessment of research may have a chance to be re-rated if they can do better. Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, chairman of UGC, spoke of the need for machinery to pick up those that improve "dramatically" in giving evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology last week. But no general reassessment is expected for 4–5 years and 15 per cent of the money available to the universities is now to be distributed according to the quality of research.

The assessment has provoked considerable outrage. Departmental groups have been rated as below average, average, above average or "starred" — of outstanding merit by international standards. But angry academics writing to *The Times* describe the assessment as "wholly lacking in intellectual credibility" and its methodology as "questionable", "extremely crude" and "seriously defective".

Many researchers even protest that they have been given no indication of how the ratings were arrived at. But the method was actually straightforward: "individual judgement helped by some factual records", as a member of UGC put it. Last year, a letter was sent to all universities requesting short (500–600 word) profiles of their departmental "cost centres" together with a list of five recent publications demonstrating the quality of research in each cost centre. Cost centres are larger units than departments: mathematics and chemistry have their own cost centres, but the biological sciences are divided into biochemistry and "other biological sciences", and the physical sciences into physics and "other physical sciences".

UGC's committees (for physics, biology, and so on), each with some 12–15 members then divided up into smaller subcommittees and parcelled out the replies. Further evidence was added: the number of grants and research studentships gained from the research councils over the past three years, the level of support from the large medical charities, the numbers of Royal Society fellowships held, "new blood" posts gained over the past three years and money gained from industry. Opinions were sought and meetings convened with the research councils — which gave their private rather than corporate views.

At the end of this first stage, cost centres were scored on a scale of 1 to 5; where there were many departments in one cost centre (zoology, genetics and biology are all "other biological sciences"), some subcommittees scored individual departments. Final adjustments were made at

meetings of whole committees where personal knowledge of outstanding researchers, or those that had slipped from their prime, counted for much. It was then decided not to mention specifically the below-average departments, nor to say how below average they were, but to issue just three ratings and the "stars".

Given the way the assessment was done, huge surprises cannot be expected; *en masse* the results confirm popular prejudice (see map). In the Celtic north and west and parts of the Midlands, below-average cost centres are in the majority, often by a very considerable margin. London (with a few exceptions), the south and north of England and Edinburgh and Glasgow are in the black. Towering above all are Oxford and Cambridge, the latter with a staggering 32 starred departments and none below average.

But it is not all so simple. Even universities with poor overall ratings may contain departments of excellence — Dundee with stars for biochemistry and applied mathematics for example. Do these indicate a few individuals' outstanding efforts? And there are whole universities which go against trends. Warwick had seven stars

In the hatched areas universities have less than one above average cost centre for each one below average; at the two black dots (Oxford and Cambridge) there are nineteen or more above average for each below average; in other areas the ratio varies from one to ten above average (University of Warwick) to below average.

and no below-average departments: does this suggest others might learn from its management?

Critics, on the other hand, would say that nothing useful can be gained from the assessment. The chief objection is that it was grossly unfair to look at cost centres rather than individual departments. Several different departments often had to share a single report and pool the five examples of their recent work, so that some researchers went virtually unrepresented. The problem is most severe for small arts departments where, as one historian put it, research on Ancient Greece, might be judged from a work on modern Europe.

Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer agrees that the assessment results have not been "perfect" here. Small departments may also have been penalized because there seems to have been little effort to look at productivity per staff member rather than a few examples of excellence. *Science Citation Index*, with weighting for quality of the journal cited, might have provided a database.

Another criticism is that the style of a university has not been taken into account. Salford, for example, scores rather poorly but has been held up by British Prime Minister Mrs Margaret Thatcher as a model university for its success in creating jobs. A cut in funding because it fails to reach certain research norms may be regarded as an implicit judgement of its aims. Other university departments simply feel they have been wholly misjudged — and can provide evidence that they should be rated differently. But no general appeal mechanism is planned.

Perhaps the most telling criticisms of the assessment are of the effect it may have. What made the assessment necessary is that funds need to be concentrated on research that will prove outstanding. A monolithic judgement may not do this but simply fulfil its own prophecies. Departments that have, in the past, been poorly funded by the research councils are likely to have gained poor ratings and will now find life even more difficult as they lose UGC funds. The judgement of UGC may make it harder for them to find funds from other sources too.

But, if it is original ideas that should be funded, it can be argued that the more independent sources of funds there are the better. How will poorly rated departments, among them those that contain a few excellent people, now get back on their feet? Sir Peter advised that universities should continue to fund the good and pick out for help those that can improve. He saw little to be gained by putting money into bad departments. Harsh advice perhaps, but the chairman of UGC knows, perhaps better than anyone, how little money there is to spare for university research.

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