

# COMMITTEE OF HEADS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES



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Dear Sir/ Madam

**Re: Consultation Concerning the 2008 Assessment of Research in the Environmental Sciences.**

We write on behalf of the Committee of Heads of Environmental Sciences, an organisation which represents the interests of the majority of UK University Departments of Environmental Science. CHES is the only national university body representing University ES, and has a clear responsibility to engage fully with this consultation process. In particular we understand that, for the future of ES, this consultation must be constructive exercise which ensures that the resulting RAE has the confidence of a majority of the University ES community. CHES is totally committed to playing an active role in building this confidence through active engagement in every stage of the RAE process.

Our attached submission is the result of wide ranging and detailed internal consultation among the CHES membership and represents a view which will command the support of all the CHES membership even if it does not represent the preferred outcome of any individual or department. As such we strongly commend this document to you as an important first step toward the creation of an assessment process which commands universal confidence.

Yours sincerely

Prof. John McCloskey,  
Chair of the CHES Research Sub-Committee

Prof. James Longhurst  
Chair of CHES

## Background

This document is the result of a detailed and wide-ranging consultation across the full spectrum of Environmental Science (ES) departments who are members of CHES. We are fully aware that there are different views on the best way forward for environmental science in the UK. We understand that many of the departments who were rated highly in RAE 2001, would argue for a continuation of that assessment organisation – a reinstatement of the joint Earth and Environmental Sciences panel. We are also fully aware that the outcome of the 2001 RAE did not receive the confidence of many departments for reasons which have been fully aired in the past. This group of departments are broadly supportive of the suggestions contained in the HEFCE document RAE 01/2004. CHES have taken a leading role in attempting to reach a *consensus* as to the best way forward for the good of the entire discipline. We are totally confident that the suggestions which have been arrived at in our internal consultation will be welcomed all of by the CHES membership. We argue that the suggestions contained here will be acceptable to *all*, while maybe not representing the preferred outcome for *any*. As such we commend them strongly to HEFCE.

## Summary

The following are the main points made in the submission from CHES

- We strongly welcome the new methods of assessment to be introduced in RAE 2008. In particular we welcome the introduction of the quality profile. We strongly welcome the foundation of a separate sub-panel for ES.
- We are concerned that the positioning of this sub-panel in Main Panel H will be detrimental to the future status of ES.
- We strongly recommend that the ES sub-panel be moved to Main Panel E.
- We suggest that robust and formal methods for cross referral between allied disciplines (in particular between the Earth Sciences sub-panel and the Environmental Sciences sub-panel in Main Panel E) will do much to ensure global confidence in the outcome of the 2008 RAE
- We suggest that similar formal mechanisms could be put in place for sub-panels (notably geography and biology) in other main panel groupings.
- We make some recommendations concerning the relative roles of the Main- and Sub-panels.
- We make some recommendations concerning the appointment of the panels.

## Positioning Environmental Science within the RAE

1. We strongly welcome the introduction of a specialist ES sub-panel. CHES has argued for this for many years. We appreciate that this arrangement is not the *ideal* for the entire ES community but we are certain that it is the *only* arrangement which is *acceptable* to all of this community. It is the CHES view that any retreat from this progressive innovation will be unacceptable to us.
2. The position of ES in Main Panel H is a source of disquiet in some of the ES community. We are sensitive to the views of this important grouping within our membership. We make some specific points:
  - a) We feel that the implications of the positioning of the ES *outside the core science group of subjects* in Main Panel E may cause serious damage to ES as a scientific discipline and will reinforce existing confusions between environmental studies and environmental science. We perceive this as wholly negative.
  - b) Modern ES, as practiced by the best departments in the UK, (and which is the aspiration of many others), is the application of physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics, (including the most quantitative and rigorous methods from the

social sciences), to the understanding of the environment and biological (including in particular human) interaction with it.

- c) ES is the multi-disciplinary application of science not simply in an attempt to understand the spatial dimensions of society but instead to address by the application of rigorous scientific method, some of the most pressing questions facing humanity today. As such, it needs to be supported by the same resources as the other basic sciences.
- d) We note that, while this science shares much with some of the best of UK Earth Science, it includes biological and social dimensions which sets ES apart and which requires different expertise for its competent assessment.

We are strongly of the view that:

- The positioning of ES in Panel H will undermine the position of ES as a contemporary science, both in perception and in resource allocation (for research and, ultimately, teaching).
  - The inclusion of ES in a joint panel with earth science will not reflect adequately the entire spectrum of ES endeavour.
3. We therefore strongly recommend that the ES sub-panel be maintained as a separate assessment unit but that it is moved to Main Panel E.
  4. We recognise similarity of method between much of ES and Earth Science and in particular we recognise the strength of the constituency within ES which argues for the importance of earth system science. We are confident that strong and formal mechanisms for cross referral between the Earth Science and Environmental Science Sub-panels and, for example, the agreement of assessment criteria between them, will ease the concerns of much of this group.
  5. We similarly recognise the commonality of method between some elements of ES and the more quantitative elements of geography (particularly in modelling) and biology in other main panels. We again believe that similar special mechanisms for cross referral between the ES, geography and biology panels should be established.

### **Comment on Mechanisms**

We would like take this opportunity to make some comment on the detail of two documents (RAE 01/2004 and RAE 02/2004) published this year on the nature of RAE 2008.

1. CHES broadly welcomes the new structures and global criteria which will be employed in RAE 2008 which were announced in document RAE01/2004 (here referred to as 01). In particular we welcome:
  - a) The restatement of commitment to the principle of peer review (01 §10).
  - b) The use of more quantitative indicators which will improve confidence in the eventual outcome of the process (01 § 48),
  - c) The replacement of the rating scale with a quality profile (01 § 49-54). We endorse the rationale for this fundamental change as outlined in 01 § 49.
  - d) The importance of mechanisms to ensure recognition in applied and multi-disciplinary science (01 §12,43,46-47).
  - e) The importance of Joint submissions (01 § 34-5) and Research Groups (01 § 36-7)
  - f) The aim of ensuring parity of treatment which gives rise to the main panel – sub panel structure. We will comment on this structure in more depth below.
  - g) The intention to publish a draft of the assessment criteria for consultation two years in advance of the assessment with the proviso detailed in § 2 below
  - h) The commitment to reducing the administrative and financial costs of the exercise.

2. CHES broadly welcomes the repeated consultations which are requested in the document RAE 02/2004 (here referred to as 02). In particular we urge that the consultation on criteria planned for two years before the RAE should be brought forward as much as possible so that as much time as possible is allowed for ensuring compliance with these criteria. We appreciate that there is limited time for any such advance.
3. While we recognise that the new main panel – sub panel structure aims at the moderation of application of agreed criteria at a larger scale than before, we are concerned at some of the difficulties that might accrue from it. In particular we would request that:
  - a) Since assessment criteria will, by necessity, vary between sub-panels, the role of the main panels will be only to ensure the accurate application of agreed criteria which have been arrived at by the sub-panel
  - b) The main panel should not be used to moderate to ensure the same results across the various sub-panels. The work of the Main Panels should moderate process and not relative merit.
  - c) The assessment should not be norm-referenced. Every department should be able to achieve a high grading if they satisfy the agreed criteria.
  - d) Autonomy between sub panels should be fostered as much as possible, particularly in the definition of criteria, where differences in emphasis exist within the grouped subjects. Robust mechanisms for cross referral between sub-panels should be created and reinforced
  - e) The position of Main Panel chair is crucial to the smooth and dependable operation of the whole assessment group. We feel it important, if the position is to be filled with anyone who is seen to be allied to any particular sub-panel, that this role be rotated between the sub-panels in successive RAE's and that it should not be seen of as the preserve of the most powerful sub-grouping.
4. We are broadly supportive of the mechanisms for selection of main panels in as far as these mechanisms are detailed in 02. We would like to make the following points:
  - a) The criteria for the selection of main panel Chairs should be clear. In particular the mechanisms, if any, for the choice with respect to the sub-panel disciplines should be completely transparent.
  - b) We request that at least one of the additional members of the main panel should be drawn from users of applied research. We will be happy to nominate one or more of such people.
5. We broadly welcome the requests for nomination from an inclusive constituency for members of the sub-panels. Again we request that:
  - a) The exact criteria for sub-panel membership selection should be entirely transparent.
  - b) The exact criteria for the selection of the Chairs of sub-panels should be entirely transparent.
  - c) The membership should reinforce the peer-review imperatives of the entire exercise. We note that the RAE sets out to review *University* research. This should be strongly reflected in the membership of the sub panels
  - d) The definition of 'Merit' as in 02 § 27 is crucial and should be carefully considered. We submit that in addition to the features outlined in this paragraph, that merit should expressly not include any reference to membership of previously highly rated RAE submissions. We can think of few ways in which a lack of confidence in the process could better be fostered than the panels be regarded, by their membership, as excluding large sections of the ES community. Scientific credibility of the *individual* should be the dominant criterion.