

The Institution of Environmental Sciences

The professional body for environmental scientists
President: His Grace the Duke of Westminster OBE TD DL



**PO Box 16
BOURNE
PE10 9FB**

Telephone & Fax: +44 (0) 1778 394846
E-mail: ies-uk@breathemail.net
Web site: <http://www.ies-uk.org>

Consultation on the Research Assessment Exercise

A Response to the Commons Select Committee From the Institution of Environmental Sciences

The Institution of Environmental Sciences (IES), one of the UK's leading professional bodies for the environment, understands that consultation is taking place on the process and outcomes of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). IES is keen to see that the highest standards of environmental research are attained in UK universities and that a diverse and sustainable base of research is maintained in the UK. In our view the outcomes of the UoA 21, Environmental Sciences Panel are anomalous and threaten to undermine the standards and diversity of environmental research in UK universities.

Although we have not been directly invited by you to comment we have been advised of this exercise by sister bodies and feel sufficiently concerned by the RAE process to generate a response at short notice. In addition to this response we also support and endorse the consultation response from the Committee of Heads of Environmental Sciences (CHES) with whom we work closely. I understand you received the CHES response from Professor Eastwood, Chair of CHES on 21/1/02. You will be aware from this response that CHES was sufficiently concerned with the outcome of the 1996 RAE to seek a meeting with the Funding Councils to seek urgent rectification of the structural inadequacies of the joint Earth and Environmental Sciences Panel. IES supported CHES in its approach and, like CHES, is dismayed that the Funding Councils were unable or unwilling to ensure that the Panel was representative of the environmental disciplines and would operate in such a way that the quality of the diverse research undertaken by the UK environmental sciences community was properly assessed. In our view the continuing inadequacy of the Panel to address important components of the UK research capability has the potential to do a major disservice to the UK research effort in the environmental sciences. Furthermore it is likely to accelerate the decline and closure of environmental science capabilities in those universities who have done less well in the assessment by the UoA 21 Panel.

IES concerns can be summarised as follows.

- The panel descriptors do not cover the range of research activities undertaken in UK environmental science departments. In particular

The operating criteria of the panel gave insufficient attention to areas of environmental policy, legislation and management. These are important UK environmental research strengths which are not given due attention in the operating criteria. No panel member is identified as covering these areas of research.

The panel descriptors give undue prominence and weight to physical environmental science (i.e. Earth Sciences) and do so to the detriment of the biological environmental sciences.

- The Panel descriptors do not appear to give weight to policy or industrially relevant research outcomes although the intention of the RAE was to recognise the importance of these areas to the UK. The UK's environmental research is undoubtedly applied and it

appears that this has not been ranked highly by the Panel. In discussions with submitting universities it appears that the research income from industrial and policy relevant research has been high but even where peer reviewed publications have followed from this work it does not appear to have been rated highly by the Panel. Furthermore, informal views from submitting institutions seems to suggest that indicators of esteem linked to industrial and policy activity, such as advice to Government, work with industry or engagement in learned society activities do not appear to have carried any particular weight in the UoA 21 Panel.

- The outcome of the UoA 21 Panel deliberations appears to be significantly different from the RAE as a whole, from UoA20 (Earth Sciences) and the umbrella panel of sciences. It has a strongly bimodal distribution of scores, a mean score of 3.26 (the lowest mean in the RAE) and a mode of 2 (whereas the whole RAE mean is 4.1, mode 5). There are only two 5* (both of whom had panel members) and two 5 universities equating to just 12% of the submitted total. This is the lowest proportion of 5* departments in all of the Panels.
- The joint UoA 20 and 21 Panel contained just two members whose institution submitted to UoA 21. This calls into question the peer review capability of the Panel

In summary the IES is concerned that we have now arrived at a position where UK research in environmental science is judged to be the worst performing area in the RAE.

Either there is an intentional or accidental application of bias in the UoA 21 deliberations and outcomes that have disadvantaged and undervalued the UK environmental science research effort or there are severe and structural problems in the nature and quality of UK environmental research. We do not accept that the latter case is true but in either case environmental science research demands urgent attention from policy makers and the funding councils. In partnership with colleagues in CHES, the Institution of Environmental Sciences would be happy to provide further information on the nature, state and diversity of environmental research in the UK.

Professor James Longhurst F.I.Env.Sc.
Vice-Chairman of Council
Institution of Environmental Sciences
PO Box 16
Bourne
Lincolnshire
PE10 9FB

Tel / Fax: 01778 394846
Email: ies-uk@breathemail.net
Web site: www.ies-uk.org