

Summary of sector responses to Unit of assessment Consultation paper

Purpose

This provides a summary of the key points arising from sector responses to the Unit of assessment Consultation paper produced by the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) Sector Reference Group.

Note: The Tertiary Education Commission and the Sector Reference Group makes no claims about the accuracy or appropriateness of any of these sector responses.

Introduction

The consultation paper discusses the unit of assessment for the 2012 PBRF quality assessment. The paper considers some options for addressing these issues and makes a recommendation, and also invites feedback from the tertiary education sector on these options and recommendation.

It was approved by the PBRF Sector Reference Group at their meeting on 8th August 2008. Sector response to this consultation paper was invited through the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) web site from 12th September 2008 to 31st October 2008.

A total of 17 responses were received. The respondents are listed in the Appendix.

Organisation of summary

The summary has been organised into the following four parts:

- A. table of expressed preferences on the unit of assessment
- B. reasons given in submissions as to why the individual is preferred as the unit of assessment
- C. reasons given in submissions as to why the individual is not preferred as the unit of assessment
- D. miscellaneous comments

Summary of responses

Part A: Table of preferences

Preference	Number of submissions expressing this preference
The unit of assessment for the 2012 PBRF quality evaluation remain as the individual	13
The unit of assessment for the 2012 PBRF quality evaluation not remain as the individual	3
No preference expressed	1

Part B: Reasons why the individual is preferred as unit of assessment

Some reasons were given in more than one submission:

- retaining the individual as unit of assessment will maintain consistency with the previous two rounds and allow comparison of results from 2012 with results from the previous two rounds (6 submissions gave this reason)
- changing the unit of assessment will increase compliance costs for TEOs (5 submissions gave this reason)
- having the individual as the unit of assessment provides greater transparency for the PBRF process (3 submissions gave this reason)
- the individual receives useful feedback about their research quality (2 submissions gave this reason)
- changing the unit of assessment will not reduce and may increase TEO 'game-playing' (2 submissions gave this reason)
- insufficient evidence of the benefits of a change (2 submissions gave this reason)
- group assessment dilutes individual responsibility for the group score and may de-motivate individuals (2 submissions gave this reason)

The following reasons were also given:

- changing the unit of assessment will not necessarily avoid, and may increase, negative impacts on staff morale (for example; a researcher who received an 'A' quality category as an individual becomes part of a group that receives a 'B' quality category)
- the current unit of assessment is well understood
- group assessment still relies on individual assessment
- an individual unit of assessment aligns well with New Zealand values and culture
- the CRE and PE components of EPs encourage individuals to collaborate in research
- other TEO mechanisms can address any impact that PBRF has on teaching
- the relative smallness of New Zealand makes any comparison of group assessments difficult
- the unit of assessment does not itself impact on the operation of PBRF

- units of assessment other than the individual are erratic
- highly ranked individuals have increased in 'value', which is a positive given that New Zealand academic salaries are relatively low
- for TEOs that produce research at a level lower than the bottom PBRF fundable level but still at a level sufficient to meet the requirements of the Education Act, an individual unit of assessment shows research peaks and avoids the low scores that a group unit of assessment would result in

In addition, the following reservations were recorded as supplementary to an endorsement of the individual as unit of assessment:

- TEOs must act appropriately with all information on individuals
- all staff who research must be eligible for PBRF
- issues with eligibility and reporting must be addressed if the individual remains as the unit of assessment
- negative impacts on equity groups must be addressed
- the auditing process in 2006 did not necessarily capture the extent to which 'game-playing' contributed to changes in average quality scores
- enabling sustainable research environments is crucial and a commitment to retaining the individual as unit of assessment is dependant on the extent to which this is achieved
- other profiling data must be collected at the same time as PBRF, to allow comparison with other research assessment exercises
- group-based assessment must be considered after 2012
- issues with professional and applied research must be addressed
- an individual's quality category must be confidential to that individual

Part C: Reasons why the individual is not preferred as unit of assessment

Some reasons were given in more than one submission:

- Individual's quality categories are misused by TEOs for such things as recruitment or deciding pay instead of having appropriate internal performance appraisal processes (2 submissions gave this reason)
- an individual unit of assessment does not reflect that research in some disciplines is done by teams of researchers (2 submissions gave this reason)
- the purpose of PBRF is to allocate bulk funds to TEOs and individual performance scores should not be the means by which this is done, especially as individuals have no influence on how TEOs distribute and spend PBRF fund allocations (2 submissions gave this reason)

The following reasons were also given:

- sometimes errors are made in assigning quality categories and some individuals can be stuck with an mistakenly low quality category for six years
- a low PBRF quality category can negatively impact on an individual's career
- an individual unit of assessment discourages joint authorship
- grading individuals is divisive
- TEOs sometimes put pressure on individuals to disclose their quality category
- legal issues could arise from TEOs inappropriately using individuals quality categories
- comparison of PBRF results with results from previous years are statistically unreliable so the alleged ability to compare results is not a reason to retain the individual as the unit of assessment
- an individual unit of assessment endangers the development of new and emerging researchers
- the current individual unit of assessment is inflexible and favours individuals in certain types of roles within TEOs
- the current component weighting leads to low average scores for individuals

Part D: Miscellaneous comments

The following miscellaneous comment was also made:

- individuals may indulge in 'game-playing' in addition to the 'game-playing' of TEOs.

Appendix

A total of 17 responses were received. The responses received fall into three categories. All responses are given equal weight by the PBRF Sector Reference Group.

Responses made on behalf of the following institutions or organisations:

- Association of University Staff and the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education
- New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee
- Vice-Chancellor's Office of The University of Auckland

Responses made by staff from the following Tertiary Education Organisations:

- Auckland University of Technology
- Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology
- Eastern Institute of Technology
- Lincoln University
- Massey University
- Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
- Unitec Institute of Technology
- University of Canterbury
- University of Otago
- University of Waikato

Responses made by individuals:

- 4 responses were received from individuals