

## **Engineering Professors Council Policy Forum – 20 May 2009**

### **Topic #1: REF**

These notes contain the pertinent points raised with regards to future implications of the REF, as discussed and generally agreed at the policy forum. As such, they;

- Constitute a record of the discussions, and
- Define the parameters which will help shape EPC position and policy regarding the REF.

Professor Tony Unsworth (Durham) delivered a keynote presentation summarising the main issues he saw concerning the REF, particularly as it applies to the subject of Engineering. This was later followed by four 40 minute break-out groups during which the points were discussed and others raised. These were subsequently summarised during a plenary session, and conclusions set out below. It is realised that absolutely comprehensive coverage was not possible in the time available. Nevertheless, the following provides an indicator of the consolidated thoughts and views of the participants.

Any further supplementary points should be forwarded to the EPC.

- EPC should take a constructive approach to the REF. Whilst many concerns exist as to how it may affect Engineering, we should argue constructively for an approach creating a system which actually assists better research to be facilitated.
- There was much concern over the view held in some quarters that Engineering and Science form one continuum (and therefore may be treated together). The point was strongly made (almost unanimously) that Engineering and Science are DIFFERENT in a number of aspects and should be considered differently. EPC is disappointed that Engineering is frequently represented to government by scientists, and not engineers.
- The metrics associated with REF were discussed and some concerns expressed over the emphasis on citations. Within engineering, many key publication outlets are not included on the various databases. Also, the timeframes to maturity of a piece of work (and the consequent citations), are different. The metrics ultimately adopted should correspond with matters valued by engineers. There was strong consensus that citations were inappropriate to academic research in the vast bulk of Engineering Departments. Most engineering research is Mode 2 and about application therefore researchers primarily publish to disseminate to their relevant sector in the engineering industry –who do NOT consult Citation indices for indication of research quality. Significant value is however placed on high quality conference dissemination, Emphasis on Citations risks distorting academic engineering research away from applicability to UK plc

and be counter to all other government intent in funding engineering research.

- Overall, it was agreed that we expect a similar number and range of sub panels under an Engineering Panel (as for Panel G in RAE2008). Any broadening of scope risks reducing the ability to assess Impact, Environment and Outputs.
- From these differences, it is considered self evident that a strong element of peer review will continue to be vital to ensuring credible and reliable outcomes to the process. Due to concerns expressed about citations, many expressed strong support for the value of “impact statements” relating to outputs as a valuable indication of quality.
- Because of the breadth of Engineering, and the need for credible peer review, it is considered highly desirable to see a number of “sub-panels” constituted to consider matters of detail relating to ongoing review.
- Some more general concerns were expressed. For example, a clear policy might be desirable concerning whether departments were expected to submit their “best team” for assessment, or the whole department. Also, there was a concern that the process of assessment can create a disincentive to risk taking “blue-skies” research. We should not be risk averse.

Overall, it is considered vital that, since the assessment will inevitably affect behaviour, early notification of the significant factors will be given.