

TESTING TIMES

The boot's on the other foot as anxious academics await their results in the Research Assessment Exercise, writes **Howard Davies**.

Many readers of *LSE Magazine* will recall those tense periods between the submission of written work and the return of the marked script. Would the professor or lecturer fully appreciate the subtlety of your analysis, the power of your reasoning, and the elegance of your prose? The most extreme version of that tension, of course, occurs at examination time. The weeks between writing the exam and receiving a degree class are not ones many will wish to relive.

So spare a thought at present for LSE's hard working faculty. Because, just at the moment, the boot is firmly on the other foot. Our faculty are awaiting a verdict on their work, in the context of the British Government's Research Assessment Exercise. Though this is not true in all countries by any means, here there is a systematic assessment every few years of the quality of research output in our universities. And that assessment has a decisive influence on the distribution of Government research funds for the next five years or more. So it really matters financially, and also in terms of academic reputation.

These assessments do not happen very often, but when they do they are a time of high anxiety for academics across the country. The last one occurred in 2001, and resulted in a ranking of each subject department in each university, on a scale of 1 to 5 – though at the top of the scale there were also 5* departments. LSE had one 4-ranked department at that time, and all the rest were either 5 or 5*, which was a very good outcome. Depending on the way all these scores are aggregated, various league tables could be produced, but the one we (naturally) preferred had the LSE second, on average, behind Cambridge and above Oxford.

This time, though, the marking system has been changed, and is perhaps even more anxiety making for the individual academic than the old version. As before, each faculty member who carries out quality research – which in LSE's case is almost everyone – was required to submit their four best papers, book chapters or similar. For each subject there is a panel made up of highly respected professors from that discipline. This time each panel is required to read all

these submissions and grade them on a four point scale under the guidance of super panels managing similar discipline areas. The definitions of the four points are rather complicated, but a grade 4 is meant to be given only to a paper which has genuinely shifted the paradigm in the study of the subject, and advanced the sum of human knowledge in a material way. The rest is a bit like the star system used in the Michelin guides, where 1* is merely 'interesting', while a 3* paper is 'definitely worth a visit'.

Following the categorisation of each of the submitted papers, a rating for the whole department is produced, but that rating will be a bar graph of the star qualifications for the members of that department whose work was submitted, adjusted in minor ways to incorporate a rating of the department's overall research environment and public esteem. So this time there will be something of a smooth curve of results for departments, rather than the categorisation into distinct boxes as was the case last time. Of course, the newspapers will undoubtedly convert these curves into some sort of numerical league table, and universities are all guessing how this might be done.

For each university there is certainly a 'black box' dimension to all this. We do not know quite how each individual panel will approach its work. We do not know whether they will all operate in the same way, or rather differently. We don't quite know where the borderline between the star classifications will lie. But, whatever these uncertainties, we will certainly have to live with the outcome.

That outcome will then be used by the Funding Council to determine research fund allocations by university, though the precise way in which that will be done has not yet been disclosed. Will there be a weighting of funding towards really excellent departments in top universities? Or will the available money be spread out in a more even way? The answers to those questions will depend on the steepness of the line which the bean counters draw through these different classification levels. Is this a good system? Well, there is much controversy about it. Some argue that, as a result, academics

are almost pathologically focused on their research output, at the expense of other aspects of the job, notably teaching. They also say that the judgements reached by these panels are bound to be somewhat subjective. On the other hand, an exercise of this kind undoubtedly creates some sharper incentives for academics to produce material, and to publish it in top, peer-reviewed journals.

Whatever the balance of these arguments, the next results will appear before the end of the year and we shall have to deal with them. There is already a debate about what should happen next time, and opinion is moving in favour of a greater use of citation counts, in other words the number of times which a paper is referred to by other academics in the field, which is a loose proxy for quality and impact. Unfortunately, it is one which can more easily be used in the sciences than in the humanities and social sciences, where citation practice is rather different.

How well will LSE do? Frankly we do not know at this stage. We believe our submission was a strong one in all the areas in which we work. But it would be a dramatically strong performance if we were to maintain our second position of 2001. So, in the meantime, if you see a particularly nervous looking member of the faculty on your travels, it is probably wise not to ask how many stars he or she expects to earn in the Research Assessment Exercise. They will get to know soon enough. And just as many of you did when you were here, they will probably argue that the examiners were drunk, or mad, or both. ■



Howard Davies
is director of LSE.