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Cambridge academics top table for research

By John O'Leary
Education Editor

CAMBRIDGE cements its place as Britain's foremost university for research today with the publication of the latest in a series of assessments published every five years.

Nearly three quarters of the Cambridge academics whose research was examined by panels of experts were in departments rated as internationally outstanding. Almost all the other subjects reached the next rung of the seven-point scale.

The London School of Economics pips Oxford University for second place in *The Times* ranking, which takes into account the proportion of academics entered for assessment. Imperial College, London, is fourth.

Results from the 60 assessment panels, which have been meeting for the past year, have been awaited with trepidation in the academic world. High ratings can win a university a portion of £7 billion in government grants, but many departments will close if their ratings are disappointing.

The latest Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) saw a

sharp rise in the number of academics in top-rated departments. Almost two thirds of the work submitted was considered of national or international excellence, compared with less than half in 1996.

However, the extent of the rise in grades will make it impossible to reward successful departments on the same basis as previously. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is meeting today to decide whether to continue allocating grants at current levels for another year in the hope of securing more money from the Government's spending review, or to fund departments at a lower rate.

Professor Roderick Floud, the President of Universities UK, said: "Competitiveness through a knowledge-driven economy is a key Government target. These results show that our universities are contributing at a world-class level and we urge the Government to provide the resources to recognise and build on this success."

Cambridge would benefit by more than £5 million a year if the exercise was funded on the same basis as in 1996. Sir Alec Broers, the Vice-Chancellor,



A theft-proof handbag that fits into a slot in a chair is one of the London Institute's resits RAE rating to 5 from 3a in 1996. A number of specialist institutes did well in the

lor, said: "The results show we have got people working extremely hard right across the board. They will boost morale and really get things cooking here if the funding is settled. We are projecting a deficit for this year because costs are increasing so much, so that aspect is vitally important."

Oxford had the largest number of staff in the top two grades, after entering more than 2,000 researchers for assessment. Dr Colin Lucas, the Vice-Chancellor, said: "The RAE 2001 has confirmed that, among those UK universities with the full range of academic

disciplines, Oxford and Cambridge remain clear leaders."

Most of the improvement has come from expansion in departments that benefited financially from high ratings in 1996. Bahram Bekhradnia, HEFCE's director of policy, said: "This is selectivity at work. We gave more money to the top-rated departments and they invested it in more staff. We shouldn't be surprised that they have improved."

However, there have been success stories in all types of university. Exeter, for example, has seen the proportion of staff rated in the top two

grades rise from 8 per cent to 57 per cent. A number of new universities also did well, and three have departments rated as internationally outstanding. Liverpool John Moores and Manchester Metropolitan universities score in sports studies, while Oxford Brookes won a 5* rating in history.

Sunderland is the top-ranked new university with 61st place, despite having no departments in the top two grades. It entered 44 per cent of its academics for assessment, while some former polytechnics entered less than 20 per cent. Dr Geoffrey Copland,