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The UK Research Assessment Exercise 2001

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Introduction

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is conducted every four to five years by the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW and DENI). Its primary purpose is to: “produce ratings of research quality which will be used by the higher education funding bodies in determining the main grant for research in the institutions”¹ throughout the UK for the following four to five years. As such, they are critically important in terms of research funding. The final ratings for 2001 RAE were announced in December 2001, with funding to follow with effect from 2002-2003.

There are 69 Units of Assessment (UoAs), each with their own assessment panels. Below is a brief summary of the exercises to date, the policies adopted in 2001 and a brief discussion of the Library and Information Management Panel (Unit of Assessment 61).

Previous RAEs

The 1996 Research Assessment Exercise was the fourth aimed at providing the funding councils with the data necessary to fund research selectively. The first two in 1986 and 1989 respectively, were confined to the old university sector and were conducted by the University Grants Committee and the Universities Funding Council. The 1992 and 1996 exercises, conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on behalf of all the UK funding bodies, incorporated the new universities (post 1991 universities) and colleges of higher education.

RAE 2001

The 2001 RAE followed broadly the same approach as in 1996: the information supplied by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) provided the basis for peer review assessment of research quality by the specialist panels. The assessments were carried out on the basis of written submissions in a standard form, which included quantitative and descriptive elements. The definition of research was:

Research for the purpose of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It excludes routine testing and analysis of materials, components and processes, e.g for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.²

The guidance notes to panel chairs and members emphasised that:

The assessment process is based on a peer review and is not mechanistic...Panels will use their professional judgement to form a view about the overall quality of activity described in each submission in the round, taking into account all the evidence presented...Panel members have been appointed from the list of nominations of experienced and well-regarded members of the research community, including users of research.³

The individual criteria for assessment and working methods for all panels was published in December 1999,⁴ eighteen months before the submissions were due.

The rating scales are given at Appendix One.

The Library and Information Management Assessment Panel (Unit of Assessment 61)

The workings of the 1992 and 1996 panels and analysis of the Library and Information Management findings were reported in the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*.^{5,6} The Library and Information Management Panel for 2001 contained four members of the 1996 panel and included a clearer emphasis on archive studies and information systems. The Panel's definition of the area it expected to be covered by the Unit of Assessment was:

Information and library management: Information communities and contexts of information use; Archive administration and Records management; Information policy in the information society (including economic, social and technological impact students); Integrated information systems; Information systems, Systems thinking; Information retrieval (including interfaces and gateways); Preservation and conservation (including electronic archiving) and Information industry (including publishing).⁷

Specifying that this UoA:

- a) Would encourage research that addresses information management within specific communities
- b) Encourages studies of information issues from any disciplinary perspective

- c) Is hospitable to information systems submissions
- d) Is hospitable to submissions concerned with information management and use, including information technology applications.⁸

RAE submissions from individual institutions returned “research-active” staff, at 31 March 2001, each with up to four cited quality research publications (between 1994-December 2000), research income, number of research students, 1996-2000, with an accompanying narrative spelling out evidence of the research culture, esteem indicators etc. Evaluation of submissions was based on the quality of research as evidenced in the publications, with the following measures being taken into consideration:

- a) Extent of postgraduate research activity, as indicated by the number of research students and research studentships and completion rates.
- b) Evidence of esteem by external funders, for example research income.
- c) Evidence of vitality of the department and prospects for continuing development.

The five principal modes of publication to which the panel attached most importance were:

1. Research monographs
2. Articles in scholarly journals
3. Refereed conference papers
4. Published research reports (giving less weight to in-house publications)
5. Chapters in books
6. Practice based research.

The panel read widely from the full range of works cited, with the greatest weight attached to articles published in scholarly journals with a rigorous editorial and refereeing standard for all works cited, but giving equal weighting to electronic or other media. The panel looked for evidence of a research culture and the impact of research on practice and the research culture of the unit on the discipline.

Library and Information Management: outcomes from 2001

The results for all the Units of Assessment for all universities was published in December 2001⁹ but the funding formula not announced until March 2002, amidst considerable concern about under funding of the whole exercise and its likely future.

There had been a genuine improvement in the library and information sector, not just upward drift or grade inflation, although a few submissions achieved a lower grading compared with 1996. The new universities fared better than in 1996, with an overall better performance. There was commendable evidence that universities, as a whole, were beginning to give greater priority to research and infrastructural support.

The descriptor for the Unit of Assessment proved a workable description and the Panel welcomed the broad-based range of submissions. Overall, there had been a significant shift in the balance, with less traditional library and information research and more information systems research. This was matched by a significant increase in integration of information science, information systems and information retrieval within submissions. This, the panel believed, demonstrated a new confidence in the sector in this being the appropriate panel to judge information systems research. There was less than expected archive research returned. The Panel anticipated that this will be a growing area of research particularly in the fields of archive management, as well as history of archives. The Panel took careful account of the range of disciplines returning and the different environments within which the disciplines operate but were able to treat all submission in the same way.

As spelt out in the published criteria and working methods, individual submissions were treated as a whole, with the Panel seeking evidence of a research culture as an important part of the research strategy. Most of the research cultures and strategies showed considerable improvement since 1996, with much more robust narratives and research plans. A number of departments had clearly followed the criteria and produced pleasingly high quality narratives, demonstrating a coherent and well articulated strategy. Sadly, however, some submissions seemed to have both ignored the criteria and/or lost direction, with the strategies being almost non-existent. Where a robust research culture and research investment was clearly demonstrated, this affected the final rating.

A number of submissions were brought down by their lack of overall focus and a long tail of subnational work. Other Panels, particularly those where the overall grades had improved markedly, noted “the intelligent return” of researchers, with little if any subnational work. This was not the case in UOA61 where, although there was considerable improvement since 1996, in many submissions there remained a long tail of staff whose research output appeared to have little or no research content. The discipline still appears to lack the maturity and confidence, compared with other more traditional disciplines, to lose this “tail”. There also remains a tendency to return quantity rather than quality. The Panel welcomed the greater selectivity shown in 2001 but would urge departments to much greater selectivity, particularly at the individual researcher level, and more focused returns in any future RAE.

In a few cases, there was a lack of clear research strategy and forward plans and a rather apologetic approach to research activity, with research plans lacking originality and dynamism. The narrative in some cases appeared to have little match with research outputs cited, leading to further concern about the coherence of the whole return and strategy. The lack of strategic direction, particularly where key personnel had retired or moved on and there was no evidence of new research talent being nurtured, led to lower research ratings. Even in a couple of the higher rated submissions, there was a worrying complacency and some concern for the future viability of high quality research.

There has been an interesting increase in active and focussed research groupings, effectively integrated within departments as part of the research culture. The numbers of new researchers returned in many of the submissions is to be commended and gives some confidence to the sector in terms of the new talents coming through, bringing new skills and experiences and an overall cultural shift.

3. National/International excellence

International excellence was seen as the gold standard as assessed by individual panels, with regard to the best work being carried out anywhere in the world. In assessing whether work was of international or national excellence, the Panel exercised its professional judgement to evaluate the quality of the work. It took account of the extent to which the work advanced the subject, and increased understanding and knowledge. Consideration was given to the originality, impact, range, accuracy and clarity of the work. Originality was taken to include the use of new sources of data or significant re-interpretation. Work deemed to be of international excellence was outstanding in terms of almost all these qualities. Sadly, a number of submissions claiming to be of international standard had very limited research outputs deemed to be of international excellence, although demonstrating good, solid work at national level. At international level, there was no shortage of international conference proceedings returned but the overall quality was disappointingly low and many showed little evidence of research.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX ONE

RAE2001: The Rating Scale and description ¹⁰

- 5* - Quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted and attainable levels of national excellence in the remainder.
- 5 – Quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted and to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the remainder.
- 4 – Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the research activity submitted, showing some evidence of national excellence.
- 3a – Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in over two thirds of the research activity submitted.
- 3b – Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted.
- 2 – Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted.
- 1 – Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in none, or virtually none, of the research activity submitted.