

JOINT FUNDING BODIES' REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Response of the Association of Art Historians

The Association of Art Historians (AAH) is a Charity devoted to promoting the study of art history. It has over a thousand members, the majority of whom are involved in the Higher Education sector. We are grateful for the opportunity to offer our observations to the Joint Funding Bodies' RAE review. These observations were collected from an email exchange with all Heads of Departments of Art History and from discussions of an AAH Working Party that consisted of both RAE panel members and AAH officers. Although the views were diverse—especially about the future of the RAE--there was consensus about certain issues that must be addressed. The summary of these discussions below thus represents the views of the AAH and its membership.

The Joint Funding Bodies' review document requests feedback on models for the next RAE, and the document acknowledges the many problems that arose from the last one. However, before addressing the models for the future, some issues that arose from the 2001 RAE need to be raised. Any future Research Assessment Exercise should be designed to avoid these problems:

- The criteria of 'national' 'international' and 'subnational' were felt to be vague, meaningless, or, at best, open to misinterpretation.
- Given that panels in different units of assessment were working within disparate parameters (e.g. how much work they actually read) and to their own interpretations of the set criteria, the consolidation of results into a common league table for all disciplines was felt to establish inequitable comparisons, as some units of assessment were perceived to be harsher in their judgements than others.
- Any future RAE should minimise the opportunities for gamesmanship.
- The RAE grading system has been used by many Vice-Chancellors and heads of institutions as excuses for amalgamation and rationalisation of staff, with resulting demoralisation and inhibition of research development. This is widely the case in Departments scoring below 4, but even in Departments that improved their rating, or scored highly, there is evidence of such rationalisation and amalgamation. The imposition of grades and consequent labels has been damaging to the development of research in the discipline as a whole.
- The RAE as it stands treats different sizes and types of research communities in the same way. A system that suits the sciences may not be so appropriate for humanities.
- Certain types of art historical research that are valuable but don't result in traditional 'outputs' (e.g. curatorship, editorships) need to be more firmly acknowledged as integral to the discipline. There is evidence, for example, that art historians are avoiding curatorial activities because of their invisibility in the RAE process.
- Any future RAE should be less demanding of the time of individuals (both panellists and those preparing the submissions), less costly to the government and the university sector as a whole, and less distorting of individual research cultures.

In summary, it was widely agreed that the RAE as it stands is stifling and distorting, rather than promoting, a healthy research culture. In addition, the final funding awarded does not justify the cost of administering and running the process. Panel members struggle to remain research active during the RAE process, and staff in institutions work under duress to meet artificially imposed deadlines, avoiding important research activities that might be longer-term or are not recognised by the RAE criteria.

Your document presented four possible 'models' for future RAEs. Responses to these models are as follows:

peer review: any assessment of research should continue to involve people who are knowledgeable and active in the discipline. Judgements should not be made by non-experts.

algorithm: this model is inappropriate and wholly unacceptable for a humanities discipline.

self-assessment: self-assessment potentially provides a useful way for units to consider their strategies and future direction.

historical ratings. This was widely rejected by the History of Art community, as many History of Art units are in post-1992 universities—some of whose research potential is only beginning to be realised.

These are the responses to the 'models' as they stand. However, it is also felt that tinkering with the old system may only repeat the errors of the past. The dissatisfaction with this RAE result far outweighed the aftermath of the 1996 one. Part of this has to do with HEFCE's late announcement of the limitations on funding, but dissatisfaction is also growing at the long-term effect of research being driven by a bureaucratic exercise rather than by the needs of the research community.

Therefore, a radical rethink of the current system is called for. It has been suggested, for example, that a realistic baseline core funding should be established for all research-active institutions, calculated perhaps on the basis of research active staff (although this too is open to manipulation and exploitation), and that greater use should then be made of an Arts and Humanities Research Council to enable individual and team bids for further top-up funding. This creates a foundation of equality, but then allows units to develop their research cultures and outputs based on *research projects* rather than on *the research assessment exercise*.

I would hope that the Joint Funding Bodies' review panel could consider these issues seriously and avoid imposing on the HE sector another RAE that destroys what it purports to promote.