

Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment Response from the Women's Studies Network (UK) Association

The Association seeks to co-ordinate and promote the academic interests of all teaching staff, researchers, and students (usually postgraduates) who are involved with women's studies courses, whether offered as part of dedicated degrees in Women's Studies, Gender Studies, or cognates; or as part of other interdisciplinary degrees. In addition many members of the Association are concerned with the delivery of 'gender' elements as service modules across a range of other degrees.

Following publication of the consultation document, the Association has invited responses not only from members, but via the wider constituency served by its email discussion list. Our detailed responses are given below, but our overall concern, it should be noted, is that the RAE scarcely seems to recognise Women's Studies at all, and certainly not its **interdisciplinary variety**. A more general statement of our specific concerns may be found at the end.

Approaches to Assessment

1. Expert review

The Association favours the retention of expert review, in the sense of peer review as the approach to assessment. While other experts (such as users) might be called upon for specialist advice, expert peers should carry the main burden of judgements of quality. The academic community is unlikely to trust the judgements of 'experts' other than highly respected researchers.

- Assessment should remain primarily retrospective, as this is more objective, but with some element of prospective assessment in order to offer some means of funding upward trajectories particularly in the case of newer research groupings and post '92 universities. Objective data might include peer-reviewed publications/products/outputs with some analysis of research income, research student publications and research degree completions. However, ability to attract research income and research students can be mediated by factors unconnected with quality *per se* (such as size of unit, geographical location, research emphases, differences between disciplines) and therefore some qualitative judgements are necessary in assessing these. Therefore outputs should remain the most important criteria for the judgement of quality, and the emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity as in the 2001 exercise.
- Assessment should continue to be conducted at the level of departmental or other subject or interdisciplinary groupings. Assessment of individuals would be unwieldy and invidious and assessment at the level of institutions would conceal centres of excellence, especially within institutions without a universally strong research culture.
- While it makes sense for subject groupings to remain the focus of much assessment this disadvantages interdisciplinary groupings. **The role of interdisciplinary sub-panels needs to be strengthened** and their scope and terms of reference advertised more widely beyond the main panel to which they are attached.
- The major strength of peer review, especially where attention is given to the quality of outputs is that it is fairer and less susceptible to game-playing than other methodologies. The main weakness is that it is time-consuming and expensive. The advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

2. Algorithm – quantitative approach

The Association is strongly opposed to this approach. To assess research entirely on the basis of metrics would not deliver any meaningful assessment of quality, at least not in the Humanities and most of the Social Sciences. Measures of external research income and research student numbers/completions might play a role in other forms of assessment but cannot deliver any assessment of quality unless they are understood in the context of the wider research culture and practices of the unit under assessment.

3. Self-assessment

The current model includes an appropriate degree of self-assessment in RAE 5 and 6. This should be continued. The only valid means of validating self-assessment would be by peer review and, if this were to be fair and equitable, and not simply a judgement of ability to 'tell a good story', would effectively become a peer review methodology. This approach would encourage game-playing.

4. Historical ratings

This would align the RAE with current 'lighter touch' approach to HEFC QAA teaching assessments and might be less burdensome for institutions and as well as less costly. The disadvantages historical ratings, however, are considerable and far out-weigh the advantages. Such a system would effectively 'pull the ladder up' behind already successful institutions, to the particular detriment of post-1992 universities. It might also have a stultifying effect on already successful institutions and units, giving little incentive to improving research and would not foster the emergence of new research units. It might also, over time, prove inaccurate since institutions/units with a good past record do not always sustain it.

5. Crosscutting themes

- a. Research assessment remains the only transparent means of producing data to inform calculation of funding levels. While research councils make use of RAE data, research council and funding council activities – and ways in which they allocate research funding should remain separate.
- b. The frequency of assessment could be reduced, without detrimental effect, for a year or two. Widening the gap between exercises would allow for a better assessment of trends in research student throughput and research outputs and funding, but to widen it too far would work against those seeking to improve their rating.
- c. 'Excellence' will always be difficult to define explicitly and clearly includes originality, agenda-setting and the actual or potential impact of research within the academy and on user communities. What this means, however, varies from one discipline and should be defined, as it was in RAE 2001 by individual panel criteria. RAE 2001 did pay attention to both creativity and applicability, in particular by asking submissions to analyse the impact of their research on user communities. Once again peer-led approach, as in RAE 2001 is the most equitable and transparent means of both defining and assessing excellence.
- d. Research assessment should not be used to determine the share of the budget going to each subject, except insofar as it reflects the number of active researchers within each subject. However, as long as it is by peer-led, expert review it is an acceptable way of distributing research income across institutions within subjects
- e. In the interests of equity, comparability and transparency all institutions should be assessed in the same way.
- f. Subject panels should retain the freedom to develop their own criteria of assessment as in the 2001 exercise. This is essential to ensure that the criteria suit the specificities of each subject within the overall RAE framework.
- g. Submissions should be generated by individual departments and moderated by institutions. There should, however, be greater awareness and use of the option of cross-referencing. If such a system is to work, then the benefits of cross-referencing - which are by no means evident - must be made clear to all concerned.
In any event, should the sociology sub-panel for Women's Studies remain, there is a particular difficulty for Women's Studies researchers in convincing those with departmental and institutional interests that the sub-panel can assess submissions from outside the discipline of sociology.
- h. The RAE needs to do more to reflect the research activities of staff who do not fit into traditional discipline groupings, particularly those engaged in interdisciplinary research where, as in Women's Studies, research active staff are often dispersed by institutions to different units of assessment, thus reflecting neither the quality nor the impact of their research. More creative means need to be found to address this problem. Many Women's Studies researchers, in common with others who work in interdisciplinary contexts, feel that their work may be 'left out of the loop', or at best subsumed under established disciplines, where the specificities of their research cannot gain full recognition. Unless this is addressed, the research base will inevitably narrow and exacerbate existing inequalities. At the wider level, there is a need to challenge the systematic channelling of funds to established elites by recognising - and supporting - the value of developing new (geographical and thematic) centres of research strength. Although funding levels are a separate issue, any future RAE should seek to ensure that valuable and productive research in the less well-funded universities does not remain unrewarded.

- i. The priorities are fairness, transparency and flexibility. In these terms a particular concern of our association is the treatment of the Women's Studies sub-panel. Our strong preference is for a full Women's Studies panel (see item 6 below) but should this prove impossible, we agree that Women's Studies should continue as a sub-panel of sociology, providing that some important adjustments are put in place. The Association acknowledges the efforts made by the recent sub-panel to assess Women's Studies inclusively and fairly, but if the assessment is to work effectively, more needs to be done.
 - The sub-panel must be known beyond the sociology community. In future exercises its existence and terms of reference must be advertised more widely. In the report on the workings of the sub-panel (42a) in the 2001 exercise it was noted that there were a large number of referrals from within sociology and some from other social science panels, but none from the humanities, despite the large volumes of interdisciplinary women's studies work submitted to humanities panels. It has since come to our attention that some of our members did not even know of the sub-panel's existence.
 - The sub-panel needs to be established at an earlier date, its membership, terms of reference and interdisciplinary scope advertised more widely and positive encouragement given to cross referrals.
 - Membership of the sub-panel should be extended to cover a greater range of areas in which Women's and Gender Studies have research interests. The Association is aware that the terms of reference for the recent sub-panel indicate its interdisciplinary remit, but with rather broader subject area representation within a single panel, interdisciplinarity would gain greater credibility - not least at the institutional level - and a greater volume of submissions.

6. Have we missed anything?

A crucial issue for this association is the treatment of interdisciplinary research and in particular the fact that our subject area is represented and assessed only by a sub-panel. A full panel would be preferable and might encourage institutions to submit their women's studies scholars for assessment as a unit rather than disaggregating them into disciplinary UoAs, which cannot effectively assess interdisciplinary research. As things stand – and this is clear from the summary report of the Women's Studies sub-panel (42a) on the 2001 exercise – many established and well-regarded Women's Studies researchers vanish from the RAE map.

If a full-panel is not considered feasible, then the membership of any future sub-panel should be enlarged to reflect the full interdisciplinary scope of the field of Women's Studies. Moreover, the reasons why there were few cross-referrals to the 2001 sub-panel from disciplines outside the social sciences need to be addressed. These were the late formation of the Panel combined with a lack of publicity and of guidance to institutions on cross referrals to the WS Sub-Panel. While Sociology departments were well-informed about the Sub-Panel through the subject criteria, others were often unaware of the Sub-Panel's existence and its interdisciplinary scope. In future exercises, the Sub-Panel should be established at a much earlier stage, its terms of reference should be advertised more widely and means should be sought to encourage institutions and relevant panels to recognise the importance of cross-referrals.

A related problem is that institutions keen to protect traditional areas of strength held Women's Studies scholars to their disciplines of origin in deciding to which UoA their work should be submitted. In most institutions with strong Women's Studies Centres, their members are submitted to a number of different UoAs. This is likely to continue given that Women's Studies is interdisciplinary and that discipline based units do not want to jeopardise their standing by the loss of good Women's Studies scholars from their own submissions. Thus the strength of Women's Studies is under-represented. One way of overcoming this in any future exercise might be to allow institutions to make a secondary submission of interdisciplinary groupings/centres (for purposes of reputation rather than funding), in addition to their main, discipline based submissions. Another solution would be actively to encourage more cross-referrals and enable the Women's Studies Panel/ Sub-Panel to comment on women's studies research within institutions as a whole as well as at the level of institutional UoAs. Either strategy would produce a much more complete picture of the state of Women's Studies in the UK.

NB. Other areas of interdisciplinary research might also benefit from such practices. This is an important issue given that the representation of interdisciplinary work in general is one of main anxieties about the exercise expressed within the academic community.

The most radical solution would be a full Panel for Women's Studies, but this alone is unlikely to solve the problem if institutions continue to contain Women's Studies researchers within discipline boundaries for RAE purposes.