

Response of the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland
to the
Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment

Three particular overarching concerns of the Associations' members are

- the disciplinary basis of the RAE and its negative effects upon interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary (point 6)
- the need to consider whether targeted help is required or desirable to enable new subjects and new fields to develop. (10 (c))
- the implication that utility may be a criteria for excellence at the expense of quality (8).

Perhaps more than the other Modern Languages--themselves emphatically inter-multidisciplinary, and multi-regional in their focus, as well as being in a process of radical change--those working in "Iberian and Latin American Languages" have now staked their future on breaking out of separate disciplinary routines and subject terrains, as the panel's Overview Report made clear. The composition of the 2001 panel worked tolerably well as a way of recognizing this, but such a system is going to be strained beyond its limits with the likelihood in the next RAE of submissions by specialists in photography in contemporary Mexico, architecture and planning in Catalonia, Basque cultural anthropology, seventeenth-century theatre audiences, the Brazilian novel, terrorism in Peru (and so on), all drawing on several disciplinary paradigms as they tie their work to national or local specifics. This micro-representational list serves also to make the point that new fields are rapidly being developed in "Hispanism", Portuguese Studies, Latin American Cultural Studies, and studies of "Portuguese-speaking" Africa and Asia, and we would very much welcome mechanisms for identifying fields (and teams and individuals) at risk from drifting into an unfunded no-person's land between disciplinary "units". However, one fundamental problem is that there are not enough core funding or PG awards available to sustain established areas of disciplines far less new ones. Whilst RAE should support and recognise the development of new disciplines they should not automatically be privileged. On the issue of "utility", we would not wish utility to be a central issue in

determining what "excellence" in research might be: "utility" is perhaps more appropriately to be tested against the composite output of teaching, skills training, scholarship, and research together.

Concerning Approaches to assessment

Group 1: Expert review
our views are that:

- a. assessments should be a combination of prospective and retrospective
- b. assessors should consider the same objective data as in RAE2001
- c. assessments should be made at the level of groups or departments
- d. we can see no alternative to organising the assessment around subjects or thematic areas
- e. strengths: gives the fullest picture and most measured judgement;
weaknesses: is labour intensive

Concerning Group 2: Algorithm

our views are as follows:

We do not believe that it is, in principle, acceptable to assess research entirely on the basis of metrics in this area of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. If funding were tied to the available metrics one of the effects would be to encourage the production of repetitive, unoriginal, and verbose items best thought of as "outputs" than as works of scholarship and deep research.

Concerning Group 3: Self-assessment

our views are that:

- a. data that institutions might be required to include in their self-assessments would match closely those made available for RAE2001
- b. the assessments should be a combination of prospective and retrospective
- c. criteria should match closely those used for RAE2001 and should be the same in each institution and each subject
- d. credible validation of institutions' own assessment of their own work might be achieved through a selective and graduated audit
- e. this approach would be more burdensome than expert review, as TQA and its intricately introduced "light touch" successor have shown
- f. strengths: allows a decentralisation of costs and effort;
weaknesses: merely shifts cost and effort, at best; the dangers of gender bias in

institutionally implemented systems of self-assessment; the additional burden (including the need for elaborate training at institutional level)

Concerning Group 4: Historical ratings
our views are as follows:

We do not believe it is acceptable to employ a system that effectively acknowledges that the distribution of research strength is likely to change very slowly. As outlined in our introductory remarks, this is a set of disciplines characterised by very rapid change. The likely effects upon behaviour of such an approach would be elitism and disciplinary sclerosis at one end, stagnation and decline at the other.

Concerning Group 5: Crosscutting themes,

Since many of these questions will be addressed by our respective institutions at Faculty level, where we also have an input, we restrict ourselves to a few issues only.

18 (a). Yes, we believe that there is scope for the funding councils to work with other funding agencies--the AHRB, for example, could provide anonymized data on the quality and quantity of applications and outcomes by groups or departments as well as statistics on amounts awarded; funding agencies could provide statistical information on completion rates of postgraduates, range and amounts of awards made; in both cases a burden would be lifted from institutions, currently required to marshal this presumably already known data.

18(c) While the general thrust of the present RAE criteria for measuring excellence are to be retained, there are aspects of research activity which require clarification. This is particularly true of translation work and the generation of teaching materials where it is often the methodology on which the publication rests which contains the research component.

18 (d). We feel that a fair distribution of funds should certainly include strategic judgements on the importance of subject areas to the UK, in the context of not only the historical funding imbalance between the non-social

sciences and other areas but also failings in national and governmental perceptions of the importance of the cultural and linguistic competence to national wealth and well-being. An important question not addressed in this section is how will the exercise be used to discriminate between the different subject pots and their sizes.

18 (g). Yes, each subject or group of cognate subjects should be assessed in the same way. However, if the number of groups assessed is to be severely curtailed it will be important for the criteria and their operation to be agreed across cognate boundaries and implemented in the same manner within component parts of cognate groupings.

Priorities

- rigorous
- informative
- fair

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