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**Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment:
invitation to contribute**

November 2002

Response of the AUPHF

**(Association of University Professors of French and Heads of
Departments of French in Universities in the United
Kingdom and Ireland)**

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1. **The AUPHF.** This response has been co-ordinated by the executive of the AUPHF (Association of University Professors and Heads of French). The AUPHF represents French studies in HEIs in Britain and Ireland. In drafting this response we have canvassed opinion widely across the French studies community in the UK, though the time-scale prevented us from carrying out the thoroughgoing consultation that we would have preferred. Some of the material here is also based on a one-day conference we held in April 2002 on RAE and the future of French studies. While it is impossible to achieve unanimity on such a complex matter, and while there is dissent on certain points of this document, we are confident that the views expressed here reflect an important cross-section of opinion.
2. **The research context in French.** Research in French studies in the UK is thriving. Interdisciplinarity came early to us and we cover an unusually wide spectrum of interests (theory, literature, history, politics, history of art, film and media studies, cultural and area studies, language and linguistics, Francophone and postcolonial studies, to name but the most obvious). The range of submissions under French in RAE 2001 confirmed that the discipline is now livelier and more dynamic than it has ever been. We can justifiably claim to occupy a vantage point at the interface of almost every humanities discipline.
3. **French and the RAE process.** Despite excellent ratings in the subject, there is a widespread conviction that French studies overall has been disadvantaged by the RAE process. There is concern that important areas of our work may have been neglected, that the rigid composition of panels has made inclusion of certain types of work problematic, and that the RAE process may over the years have militated against emerging areas of research. Even allowing for cross-referral of submissions, the overlap between French and European Studies left some departments with a feeling that they were caught between two panels. Colleagues working in language and linguistics sometimes felt similarly disadvantaged, and some sections felt that they would have preferred to make their submission to a Modern Languages panel. Perhaps some of these problems could be addressed by having a unit of assessment called 'French studies' rather than just 'French'. The question of subject-based pedagogic research, however, still needs to be addressed more widely, since the dividing line between 'materials' and 'research' remains unclear.
4. **Parity between panels.** Notwithstanding the excellent work carried out in difficult circumstances by our colleagues on the 2001 panel, many of us remain concerned by the problem of parity between different subjects. Statistics for languages in RAE 2001 show that while 31.57% of Italian departments achieved 5* ratings, that proportion in French was only 13.95%. We are concerned that this discrepancy may be an inaccurate reflection of relative quality. And while we understand that the French panel expected 30% of staff to be of 'international' standing for a unit to be

graded 5, it appears that 10% was sufficient in politics. When such discrepancies are repeated across the HE sector, they result in both real and perceived injustices.

5. **Panels, remit and feedback.** The constitution of the subject panel, both in terms of specialities and institutional affiliations, remains a divisive issue. Some colleagues in newer institutions see the preponderance of members from Oxbridge and the older universities as inherently disadvantageous, though this view is strongly challenged in other quarters. Submissions under language and linguistics remain problematic, since they cover a very wide range of specialities but are small in number. The continuing absence of clarity in defining what constitutes research of 'national' or of 'international' status is widely perceived as a weakness in the assessment process. It is felt that the whole question of feedback needs to be addressed.
6. **Equality and fairness.** Since the current invitation to contribute stresses the question of equality, we think that equality of treatment (between institutions, between subjects, and between individuals) is the major underlying question in the current debate. It is vital that research assessment be seen above all as a fair process, and as a means of stimulating excellence in research.
7. **Transparency and accountability.** Concern about research assessment has increased in the wake of the government's failure to honour its funding promises. French studies is no stranger to the mood of pessimism and cynicism across the HE sector, and many see it as one of the more unfortunate legacies of RAE. There is a feeling that since we are held accountable, then those who fund us have a similar duty. Unless a greater degree of transparency is achieved, the process is in danger of generating further disenchantment. The integrity of those involved in the work of the French panel is not in doubt, and the constituency acknowledges their very real efforts to keep the process as open as possible: but it is evident that fear of litigation, for example, tends to result in public statements that are not detailed enough to be helpful.
8. **The political dimension.** While the invitation to contribute to the present discussion about RAE rightly stresses both the philosophical and the practical dimensions of the process, some of our number have stressed that its political dimension is being underplayed. What appears to have happened in RAE so far is that an elite group has had its position confirmed by a system which makes the pursuit of research elsewhere increasingly difficult. Howard Newby made it clear, in words uttered on 21 March 2002, that the effort most universities make to chase research funds is wasted. It is a race in which few will succeed and it will thereby represent misspent resources for the rest. In the light of this, it is hard not to see RAE as a costly and wasteful means of achieving a predetermined result. It leads many of us to question government's commitment to tackling inequality in the HE system.
9. **The five-year cycle.** There is widespread concern at the effect that the five-year cycle has had on rates of submissions to journals and publishers, and on the pattern of an individual academic's output. On the individual level, it seems unreasonable to expect a colleague to meet the same requirements again and again in five-year tranches over a thirty- to forty-year career. Apart from obvious changes of pace caused, for example, by parenting and other family commitments, or by evolving personal or professional circumstances, the cycle militates against the long-term

project (e.g. editorship of a multi-volume oeuvre) and the pursuit of scholarly goals not attached to publication. Meanwhile, some academic journals and monograph publishers are finding that whereas copy is in short supply in the two years following RAE, there is a rush to get into print in the final two years, causing major congestion. Although the existing system has extended the five-year period by allowing an overlap, many of us think that a period of seven or even eight years between assessments, with additional allowance for overlap, would be more appropriate.

10. **'RAEification' of research.** Increasingly, scholarly output in the UK has been regimented into assessable five-year blocks. Many scholars have expressed concern about the negative impact of this 'RAEification' of research, which has knock-on effects on recruitment and retention of staff, and sometimes an adverse effect on morale. The careers of some individual academics have been negatively affected by the RAE process, particularly where strategic decisions have been taken by their own colleagues in order to enhance a department's or an institution's prospects. The job transfer market in the lead-up to RAE may have helped the careers of individuals, but it has also caused instability. Colleagues nearing retirement have sometimes been disadvantaged by decisions not to give them study leave when their work will not count on the same basis as that of continuing members of staff. Meanwhile, the pressure for colleagues in their first post is to rush out a series of articles rather than deepen or broaden their work into a first-rate book-length publication. Postgraduates completing PhDs at the wrong point in the cycle find no posts advertised either in their specialism or French studies more widely.
11. **Submission of items.** There is a widespread conviction that the requirement to submit four pieces of work has had limiting effects, e.g. for those scholars who produce large numbers of short articles but no major items, or those who produce one major item and little additional material. There is still lack of clarity about the relative weighting attached to the different types of submission, and departments have sometimes found themselves guessing at what they think is likely to impress. Collaborative work, bibliographies, introductory and critical guides, pedagogical research, translation and editorial work (e.g. as editor of a major journal, or as a volume editor for an international conference publication) – all key contributions to work in French studies – do not fit easily into current schemes.
12. **The publication context.** It needs to be pointed out that judgements about research excellence or its absence are now having to be exercised against the background of a confusing and rapidly changing publication context. While CUP has discontinued its French series, and Grant & Cutler are no longer producing their critical guides, others (Rodopi, Peter Lang and the Glasgow University French and German series) are now responding effectively to specific needs. However, commercial constraints are tight, and we know that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get the traditional academic monograph into print. Meanwhile, if some progress appears to have been made regarding internet scholarship, there is still a suspicion that electronic publication will carry less weight for RAE purposes.
13. **A broader view and a lighter touch.** There is widespread feeling that a scholar's and a department's work over a specified period should be viewed in the round, that this should be done straightforwardly, and that it should be done with a 'light touch'. This brings with it the following requirements:

- i) that, in so far as is possible, all colleagues should be included in the assessment;
- ii) that, in addition to being longer than five years, the assessment cycle should be staggered, as it has been for teaching quality assessment, so that not all departments are having to face the same deadlines at the same moment (this would also have a beneficial effect on publishing schedules, by creating a steadier flow of demand on journals and publishers);
- iii) that there should be a more refined system of grading than the present 1-5* grid, where step changes in funding have in the past resulted from distinctions that are sometimes very close decisions.

14. **The modes of assessment.** Our comments on the four specific modes of assessment outlined in the invitation to contribute are as follows:

i) Expert review (including peer review)

Some form of expert or peer review/evaluation strikes us as appropriate, though the remit of the panel (if there is to be a single panel – see below) needs to be more simply defined. Judgments about the quality and range of an individual's or a department's research should be reached on the basis of straightforward criteria, limiting the scope for subjective assessments of quality or excellence. The national/international distinction needs either to be formulated with absolute clarity, or dropped as an inherently problematic classification.

Some have suggested that extensive scrutiny of scholarly output could be replaced by a process of evaluation based on sampling. One approach suggested is that of the teaching assessment model, where separate panels are constituted for the purpose of reviewing individual departments. This would involve many more people in the assessment process, but at a more manageable level, especially if the 'light touch' were adopted as a general policy. Like teaching assessment panels, such panels would evaluate a range of evidence and then 'drill down' where necessary. However, we should add that there is no overall consensus in our subject area about such matters.

ii) Algorithm based entirely upon quantitative metrics

Such a model does have a certain in-built transparency. However, while we favour the notion that a scholar's and a department's work should be assessed in its entirety, a *purely* metric model would not be suited to our discipline. There would be concern, especially, about the validity of citation indices which can all too easily turn into mutual recognition by and of an inner circle. In any case, citation indices miss any type of contextual clue. You can be quoted because you are bad, because you are a friend, because you are a patron, or simply because you are the only person to have worked in an area.

Although research income is one measurable sign of successful activity, there are also strong misgivings about this as a performance indicator in our subject area. While we recognise that funding applications are themselves subject to peer review, they are driven by a more scientific model of group and collaborative research. Many colleagues in French studies still feel uncomfortable about forcing their research into

the mould of the collaborative enterprise.

We therefore feel that the algorithm model, though having the virtue of transparency, has to be sensitively and intelligently used, in combination with other modes of assessment. While we think it is appropriate to ask departments for lists of publications and other signs of research achievement, these need to be evaluated rather than simply quantified.

iii) Self-assessment

We believe that the role of self-assessment in the process should be strictly limited. If self-assessment were the basis, the element of spin and exaggeration would inevitably increase. In addition to the latitude it allows for 'games-playing', self-assessment is also the most time-consuming model.

iv) Historical ratings

Historical ratings are a vicious circle, in which those who already have simply receive more, and the have-nots are further excluded. While historical success is bound to have some impact on a department's present standing, it is nonetheless crucial to be able to see whether the department is on an upward or downward trajectory. The notion of past 'track record' is a way of perpetuating inequity, and if used extensively would be seen by many as the sign of a deliberately selective strategy. Many of us feel that this would be divisive and damaging.

- 15. Broader issues and alternative models.** It seems important to remember the relationship between research and teaching. Any division of departments into 'research only' or 'teaching only' is deplored, since good teaching and good research go hand in hand. There are cases where this balance has almost certainly suffered: indeed, it has been argued that the learning environment has deteriorated in some institutions where research has become the major goal to pursue. In general, recent years have seen departments subjected to a see-saw movement between teaching assessment and RAE. While the teaching assessment model for QAA and internal subject reviews can offer some useful lessons for the research assessment process, the possibility of a composite form of assessment (as used, for example, in Australia) should not be rejected. Another alternative model is the French system whereby universities negotiate a package with government. The university proposes a research plan, is funded on the basis of its plan, and then is assessed five years or so down the track. This model has the virtue of encouraging a partnership between universities and government.

On the question of emerging research, the system needs to take account of the fact that there are research areas under development which may influence the future agenda but are still not fully organised (e.g. because postgraduate studies have never been funded in that area, or because appointments have not been made). Any process of assessment that asks established experts to evaluate research also has the potential to discourage emerging areas before they can develop. While we could find on the one hand that such areas receive support, e.g. through the AHRB Innovation Awards scheme, they could on the other hand get short shrift at the time of research assessment if they are not already sufficiently well established to have gained peer group approval.

16. **Conclusions.** While the AUPHF actively supports the notion of maintaining some form of research assessment, we urge that the process be

- i) fair and equal to all institutions and all individuals;
- ii) straightforward and transparent, and administered with a light touch;
- iii) sensitive to different types of research (including emerging areas) and to the different personal or institutional circumstances in which it is produced;
- iv) representative of the full spectrum of the subject.

We think that some element of peer evaluation, combined with an objectively compiled table of research output, and refined to take account of longer-term projects by individuals as well as by groups, would be an appropriate balance. Personal and professional circumstances (career breaks, administrative loads, etc.) need to be effectively factored in. The period between assessments needs to be longer than five years (probably seven to eight years, with allowance for an additional overlap) and we are in favour of staggered assessment deadlines. Finally, we would advocate a more comprehensive scale of grading than the current system.

We hope this contribution will be of interest, and we look forward to participating in further exchanges as the debate about the future of RAE continues.