

NAMHE

*National Association for Music in Higher Education*

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**RAE Review: Invitation to contribute**

I am responding to this invitation as representative of an interested party, namely music as a discipline in higher education in the UK. I write as Chair of NAMHE, the National Association for Music in Higher Education.

NAMHE has not been able to meet since the invitation was issued and it became clear that a subject response was advisable. But the invitation document has been circulated to the representatives of all 63 music departments that are members and we have received responses from 16 of them, including the 9 represented by the committee, which has debated the issues electronically. More would have been forthcoming were time not so short. I should perhaps add that not all institutions were encouraging or even permitting their departments to receive and debate HEFCE's invitation, which seemed strange if not wrong to us; all the more reason, we felt, to respond ourselves.

Predictably and sadly, departments that did well in RAE 2001 are broadly happy with the current system and wish to finesse it in certain ways while those with modest or disappointing results want wider-ranging change. This tells us what we already knew from the label 'research inactive': that the RAE has proved petty and divisive, the safeguarding of one's own department—even of one's own individual work—ranking higher in colleagues' thoughts than admiration for or sympathy with another's. This is not what the community of scholarship should be about and is highly regrettable. Add to that the frustrations of reward not following achievement, both because one's own institution has in many cases chosen not to pass the money down and because, as we now learn, commensurate funding is no longer going to follow from the Treasury in any case, and scepticism turning into cynicism becomes rife, as many comments have made clear. In short, if previous RAEs were taskmasters, RAE 2001 has become a bogey, precisely because with funding and system (therefore grades) currently frozen we cannot simply walk away from it: it would be locking the stable door after the horse has bolted. If this is a strategic ploy, intended to snap historical gradings into place (there is after all a section on this as a possible way forward in the document) without further pump-priming for change, it will prove bitter medicine to many. Fixing a gulf between the haves and the have-nots, as also between centres of excellence and isolated individuals, will be disastrous not just to the collegiality of our subject and our system but to the career structure of the profession. In North America, so often looked to for false comparisons, private funding and tenure systems, not to mention the sheer size of the market, enable a far broader and varied fit between profile and opportunity. Such conditions do not pertain here, especially in a relatively small subject such as music.

The positive aspects of the RAE have perhaps been taken for granted, for I see little if any reference in the responses to the extra money for research over the past decade that has been forthcoming or to the undoubted fact of our increased productivity (as opposed to cultural improvement, which is more debatable). I do believe that British musical research stands in higher international esteem now than in the 1980s or before, and although that is a subjective opinion, my point is that if the RAE is to any extent to be thanked for this its job must continue to act as catalyst through competition, not cultural arbiter—there is no enthusiasm for HEFCE taking upon itself to determine the subject's research importance to UK national endeavour in future exercises, though it might do more to uncover it (see below).

Perhaps I may now summarise some of the responses to individual ideas and questions.

- Peer review remains the favoured method of assessment.
- The isolated researcher is not working in a vacuum (see my penultimate paragraph below) and should not be disadvantaged.
- Greater use of algorithms seems to appeal to creative arts departments and practitioners more than scholarly ones, perhaps in line with audience and community reception as opposed to readership and citation—but these are a minority.
- Citation measurement is deeply distrusted.

- Something similar could be said of self-assessment, deemed even more wasteful of paper than peer review, though I must come back to this below.
- Mixed prospective and retrospective assessment is favoured, together with a long timespan because of the nature of much research production in the arts.

There is a general repugnance towards standardisation: in this country music departments have traditionally been very different one from another and we want to keep them that way. We also want to keep them holistic, for while many are happy with research and teaching being assessed separately most if not all believe that the one discipline informs the other, and to separate them unduly would undermine British traditions of musical scholarship and creativity: this is a highly specific factor not necessarily applicable to other disciplines, let alone other countries. In other words, most music departments want to teach and to profess musicology, performance and composition, and it is the RAE's job to find ways of enabling, not obstructing this through assessment.

I used the word 'profess' rather than 'research'; for perhaps the time has come to ask whether some other word for practice-based activity at the highest professional level within the academy might not be more appropriate than the blanket term under which we have all writhed for the past 30 years or so. I quote Professor Peter Hill, professional pianist and musicologist at the University of Sheffield, than whom no more experienced authority on the subject will be found:

I think it misguided to try to tie the label of 'research' around performers and composers. It seems to me that a new category - e.g. 'creative work' - or some such is needed. Personally I feel very strongly about this, having for all my university career juggled the demands of orthodox research with piano playing. Next May, for example, I have been asked to give a recital of Schoenberg and Beethoven which will be taken by Radio 3. Weeks if not months of work will go into this, but it cuts no ice as 'research'. This seems wrong to me, since this sort of concert work is clearly part and parcel of the contribution I make to the Department as a teacher, and indeed it informs my work as a scholar.

There has been a fair measure of dissatisfaction within the profession about the criteria and results of practice-based research in RAE 2001, so it is easy to see why the issue needs extensive revisiting—or, as I am suggesting, properly visiting for the first time—long before any further assessment. We look to HEFCE to host such visitation and should be delighted to co-operate as a subject association, bearing in mind that while many of its issues also apply to drama, dance and/or the plastic arts, others, including, I think, the size and overall scope of our subject, take us beyond them.

I should like to end on a constructive note. There is no reason why the *assessment* of research should not also entail the *celebration* of it, which the RAE could take upon itself at minimal extra cost. I give two simple, precise and typical examples. One is from my own field, the study of music in Britain and British music of the past 200 years. This has made massive strides forward in the last decade from within our universities and therefore thanks at least partly to RAE incentives; our national music accordingly rates more highly abroad than hitherto and attracts overseas researchers. But the research, often of an interdisciplinary nature, is lumped in a number of our university departments, Leeds, Durham, Birmingham and Goldsmiths' to name but four, with varying RAE grades and without (as far as I am aware) official collaboration between them, though scholarly communication is everything it need be, cradling indeed the lone researcher in still other departments. The RAE has no mechanism for recognising and publicising this aggregated achievement. Exactly the same could be said of electroacoustic composition, which pulls together at the national level to Britain's redounding credit but across a network of variously-graded campuses. If only the full picture of our research excellence in music in this country could be painted by the RAE, the result itself would cease to be a sterile algorithm and become a living force.

How can HEFCE achieve this? One suggestion has been by a *standing* research panel of the unit of assessment, shifting the balance away from institutional straitjacketing towards subject-sensitive measures and responsibilities on both sides. This seems an excellent idea and need not conflict with interdisciplinary concerns (behind which institutional expediencies too often hide). Especially if bodies such as NAMHE and the BBC (an old hand at assessment of new music and performance) were represented on it, it could mop up most if not all of the remaining concerns of our respondents, which include the following desiderata:

- rolling review (more like QA)
- differentiated review of the various sub-disciplines so distinctive in music

- sensitivity towards the monotechnics (conservatoires)
- the development of criteria for excellence by practitioners themselves in composition and performance
- recognition of the transient and local nature of some artwork
- a closing of the loop of accountability, feedback and appeal, especially where the sustainability of previous investment is an issue (colleagues feel strongly that accountability should run to penalty clauses and that an appeals procedure should be instituted).

We urge you to consider this suggestion, at least for music.

Yours sincerely,

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