

## ASSOCIATION FOR FRENCH LANGUAGE STUDIES

Joint funding bodies review of research assessment: invitation to contribute  
November 2002

Response of the AFLS (Association for French Language Studies)

This response has been co-ordinated by the Research Committee of the AFLS, with input from various other members of AFLS based in the UK. The Association for French Language Studies was founded over twenty years ago and its aims are to promote research and teaching in H.E relating to the French language. Most of our members are concerned with *both* research into aspects of the French language (including its acquisition as a second language) *and* practical French language teaching, though some are more involved with one than the other. AFLS produces the *Journal of French Language Studies* (published by CUP) and the *Cahiers AFLS*. Between 1992 and 2001, it also produced fourteen edited volumes in the series *Current Issues in University Language Teaching*, co-published by CILT (the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research). Among its other activities, the AFLS organises annual international conferences (in France, Belgium and Quebec, as well as the UK), which draw participants from many different countries and have further enhanced the international reputation of French Language Studies in the UK.

We are very much in general agreement with the response submitted by the AUPHF, but feel that an additional response from AFLS is appropriate, given that certain issues affect our members in a distinctive manner. AFLS membership includes a number of Professors and Heads of Department, but the vast majority of our members are not members of AUPHF. Many of our members belong to Departments that were entered under European Studies, rather than French. Given also the serious decline in the number of students taking French (and other languages) at school, it is particularly important to examine the position of French and the other Modern Languages in the broader national context.

### **1. The representation of French Language Studies on RAE panels**

Notwithstanding the possibility of using advisers external to the RAE Panels, French Language Studies has been gravely under-represented and insufficiently visible on the French and European Studies panels. This situation is increasingly viewed as unacceptable by our members. FLS covers a vast range, applying to French the methods and concepts from virtually every linguistic sub-discipline. It is far more difficult for a specialist in one of these sub-disciplines to make an informed judgement of work in a very different area, than it is for a specialist in French literature of one century to do the same for a different period. To give just one specific example, the concepts, data and methods used in Syntax are *radically* different from those used in Phonetics.

This problem could be rectified more easily if there were a more fluid approach to the assessment exercise, with appropriate and properly resourced small sub-panels set up to deal with particular areas of expertise, instead of the rigid 5-yearly panel that has existed hitherto. As suggested in 18 (a) of the Invitation to Contribute, there is indeed a case for the funding councils and the RAE to adopt similar assessment processes to those already in use by the research councils. One beneficial effect of this could be the involvement of a broader and more representative cross-section of experts in the assessment of research. There would of course have to be some mechanism for ensuring the comparability of judgements across and within disciplines.

### **2. The need to enhance the profile of language teaching and of associated pedagogic research**

One unintended, but highly damaging, side-effect of the dominance of the RAE has been that both the production of language teaching materials and associated pedagogic research have been downgraded in recent years, since they have been considered not to constitute research proper. A number of excellent academics in French, whose specialisms have been in language teaching and pedagogic research, have been demoralised by being excluded from the RAE, some to the extent of retiring or withdrawing from the profession. Those who have remained have often had to shift their focus into other areas in order to be entered for the RAE. And yet innovative language teaching, materials production and pedagogic research are all vital to the health of French (and other Modern Languages) in Higher Education. It is already extremely disturbing that many French Departments or Sections in UK universities have no specialist in French Language Studies - a situation that would be regarded as unthinkable in Modern Languages Departments in continental Europe. Innovative language teaching in H.E is also needed to ensure continuing improvements in the teaching of Modern Languages in schools and further education.

We would suggest two ways forward, in addition to enhancing the representation of French Language Studies on the relevant RAE panel(s). First, the status of pedagogic work in language teaching should be reviewed again. There is a good case for considering that at least some of this work, such as an advanced reference grammar, is at least equal in status to, for example, an annotated edition of a well-known novel or play intended for undergraduates, or a textbook on aspects of contemporary France. In any case, well in advance of the next RAE, there must be clear guidelines as to what types of pedagogic materials and research will be given serious consideration on their merits, rather than being dismissed out of hand. Second, we would favour a move to consider teaching alongside research 'in the round' (as suggested in paragraph 15 of the AUPHF document).

### **3. A single panel for Modern Languages**

Most of our members work in Departments that were entered for either French or European Studies in recent RAEs, and it has been pointed out (for example, in the AUPHF document) that various discrepancies arose between these two panels, and between French and other language panels. These discrepancies apparently included the treatment of pedagogic research and materials and the 'flagging' of strong research areas. We consider that there is a clear case for a single Modern Languages panel in future RAEs. More unites than divides researchers in the various Modern Languages, and to be combined under one panel would promote solidarity and give the field greater public recognition at a time when this is sorely needed in the UK. In order to ensure adequate coverage, the panel would draw on sub-panels (with adequate non-UK representation) providing subject expertise. European Studies should arguably be reserved for Departments that specialise in political, economic, legal or social aspects of Europe.

### **4. Mode of assessment and the evaluation of excellence**

We are in broad agreement with the AUPHF document: expert review, together with some quantitative indicators, seems the most appropriate mode of assessment. However, it is crucial that the criteria for 'excellence' should be made more transparent and include at least some objective elements. Crude citation metrics are clearly unsuitable for Modern Languages. In the sciences, the sheer bulk of citations provides some safeguard against abusive practices (such as the casual citation of one's colleagues or friends), but this bulk does not exist in Modern Languages. What should really count is the extent to which a piece of research has had a positive impact in the field, as demonstrated, for example, by other researchers making extensive use of it in their own work. Submissions to future RAEs could include documentary evidence of this kind of impact. Reviews of a book are, of course, subject to various types of influence and can at best offer only an informed guess as to the impact a book will have. On the other hand, extracts from the published work of other scholars who have made extensive use of the findings in the same book would provide a good indication of the book's actual impact. This provides another argument in favour of lengthening the period that is assessed in any RAE, since the *actual* impact of research can be judged only once the work has been circulated and read.

A closely related issue is the distinction between 'national' and 'international' excellence. It is perhaps curious that the vast majority of RAE panels have included only academics based in the UK, and there is at least a danger that 'international' excellence has become a category predominantly decided nationally, i.e. internally within the UK. This anomaly should be rectified in future exercises by, for example, (i) more frequent use of overseas expert advisers to panels (for Modern Languages, of course, these would not necessarily come from the United States); and (ii) the systematic use of documentary evidence concerning the actual impact of the work internationally (as demonstrated, for example, by extensive reference to the work).

Research Committee of the AFLS