

Report of the Geography Panel, 2001 RAE

1. The Geography Panel consisted of eleven members whose research expertise covered the major areas of the discipline. The Panel was supported in its work by a Sub-panel of Users and a group of non-UK advisers. The Geography Panel also acted as host to the interdisciplinary Sub-panel on Development Studies (see below).
2. Between June 1999 and October 2001 the Geography Panel met on eight occasions including three residential meetings. The User and Development Studies Sub-panels both met twice during the summer of 2001, with their advice and decisions reviewed and confirmed by the main Panel later in the year.
3. The criteria statements prepared by the Geography Panel and the Development Studies Sub-panel gave clear priority to the quality of outputs in determining grades. Initial grades for each submission, derived from an assessment of the outputs, were refined in the light of, first, accounts of research organisation, achievements and plans (RA5), and then other indicators of performance (RA3, 4 and 6). Both the Panel and Sub-panel examined in detail at least 50% of the outputs in any one submission and over 60% of all outputs. Where the Geography Panel felt it did not have the necessary expertise (for about 50 staff), it cross-referred work to other panels and used the services of an adviser in environmental health. It also reviewed over 120 staff cross-referred to it by other panels.
4. The Geography Panel received 62 submissions (69 in 1996) of which 55 were for the main Panel and seven for the Development Studies Sub-panel. The 62 submissions contained 1,229 Category A/A* staff and 77 Category C staff. Comparisons with 1996 are not easy to make but the best estimate suggests that while the number of "geography" submissions fell from 65 to 55, the number of A/A* staff FTEs rose by about 1%.
5. Many submissions were of high quality. The average grade awarded in 2001 was higher than in 1996 with an increased proportion of submissions and research active staff falling into Grades 4, 5 and 5*. Part of this increase can be attributed to a reduction in the number of weak submissions but was mainly the result of a real improvement in the quality of research submitted. This judgement is supported by the reports of the non-UK advisers and Sub-panel of Users, evidence of continuing investment in the discipline (see below), and investment made in the first part of the decade as reported by the 1996 Geography Panel.
6. The breadth of the discipline and the range of its contributions beyond the academy led the Panel to appoint a Sub-panel of seven users from the public, private and voluntary sectors. They reviewed all the submissions and examined in detail 14 research groups engaged strongly in applied work. The Sub-panel reported favourably on much of the work it reviewed. In their assessment of it, the Sub-panel made a clear distinction between innovative research that influenced user awareness and practice and routine consultancy.
7. The six non-UK advisers were asked to assess the quality of research of 18 research groups drawn from 18 different submissions. All the groups were producing some research of international excellence but were viewed by the Panel as of differing

strength. The advisers commented enthusiastically about the research of almost all the groups confirming in large measure the standard of international excellence set by the Panel and its assessment of the relative strengths of the groups.

8. The Panel received extensive evidence of the vitality of the discipline. For example, 21 submissions recorded substantial expansion or refurbishment of their space, 28 referred to new laboratories and 39 to major investments in specialist research equipment. Comparisons with the 1992-6 period are difficult to make but there has been a real increase in research income per FTE while the number of graduate students seems to have peaked in the late 1990s. Among the 49 “geography” departments returned in both 1996 and 2001, growth in research activity was widespread but most evident in the largest departments.

9. In both human and physical geography there is extensive interdisciplinary research with geographical contributions increasingly shaping the agendas of cognate disciplines in the humanities, social and environmental sciences. One indicator is the increasing number of papers by geographers in the leading journals of other disciplines. Similarly, there are encouraging signs of attempts to integrate research between distinct areas of human and physical geography, and between human and physical geography. Within human geography, there is substantial engagement with governance and policy processes, growth in theoretical sophistication linked to attempts to spatialise social theory, and innovative methodological achievements ranging from numerical, longitudinal modelling and GIS to novel participant observation techniques and the analysis of qualitative evidence. Less welcome is the continuing decline, outside of historical geography, in the publication of research monographs.

10. Within physical geography, research in Quaternary Science constituted a major presence, especially in the field of luminescence, while other agendas were being driven by sophisticated numerical modelling methods in fluvial and climatic studies, the use of geomorphological and Quaternary evidence to interpret geophysical phenomena, and new research into atmosphere-ocean and atmosphere-ecosystem interactions. There has been an influx of expertise from cognate disciplines in technically demanding areas, aiding the development of critical research mass in geography departments. This development remains variable and incomplete.

11. The Development Studies Sub-panel established its own working methods and criteria to reflect the applied, interdisciplinary nature of the field, and included two user members. Each submission was assessed by at least two Sub-panel members, including one user member, and two advisers were appointed to review research on the environment and technology. In total, the Sub-panel reviewed 176 staff including 60 cross-referred from other panels. The submissions revealed extensive activity, including high numbers of research students and significant quantities of research funding, mainly from the UK Government. However, despite some excellent research outputs, these were rarely concentrated and both the academic and user members of the Sub-panel were disappointed by the overall quality of the submissions. They sometimes suggested limited sense of strategic direction alongside funder-led agendas that lacked intellectual justification. The Sub-panel only received a modest proportion of the research being conducted in the field.

12. The Panel wishes to place on public record its thanks for the exemplary contributions of its Secretary (Denise Leishman, University of Portsmouth) and Assistant Secretary (Louisa Baker, HEFCE) who ensured that a complex and arduous task was completed to time.