

RAE2001: OVERVIEW REPORT ON UOA40 SOCIAL POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

Assessment Process

In the 2001 RAE, the Social Policy and Administration UoA received a total of 47 submissions, compared with 44 in 1996. However, although the number of submissions remained relatively constant, the number of staff submitted for assessment rose significantly from 701 in 1996 to 1000 in 2001, an increase of 43%.

The submissions were assessed by a joint Panel, which covered both Social Policy and Administration (UoA 40) and Social Work (UoA 41). As indicated in its published statement of assessment criteria, the Panel assessed the quality of research presented in the round, but attached the greatest importance to the quality of cited research output.

All submissions were read by all members of the Panel who provided independent preliminary ratings in each case. For each submission, two members of the Panel were designated as 'lead members' on the basis of their expertise in the principal research areas covered by the submission, and were responsible for leading the Panel's discussion at the main assessment meeting. In all cases, the Panel member not based in a higher education institution commented, in particular, on evidence of engagement with research users.

The Panel was broadly constituted in recognition of the multidisciplinary nature of the subjects, but it nevertheless made a significant number of cross-referrals to other Panels, particularly Sociology. It also appointed and used special advisors for six subject areas – Criminology, Demography, Disability, Gerontology, Health, and Race and Ethnicity.

All of the submissions provisionally rated 5 and 5*, together with a sample of those rated 4, were submitted to the Panel's non-UK advisors. The Panel found their responses helpful in confirming its own assessment of international excellence.

Overall, the 2001 RAE revealed a significant improvement in the quality of research in Social Policy and Administration. A total of 21% of the submissions in the UoA were rated 5 or 5* in 2001, compared with 11% in 1996. At the other end of the rating scale, just 13% of submissions were assessed as being in the lowest three rating categories in 2001 (1,2 and 3b), compared with 45% in 1996.

A profile of research

The strength and vitality of Social Policy is attested to by its expansion since RAE1996 both in absolute terms and relative to some other comparable subjects. Not all this research is carried out in departments with the title Social Policy and Administration. The panel received submissions covering people from within a range of differently labelled departments, for example:- Applied Social Science; Policy Studies; Sociology, Social Policy, and Social Work; and from joint departments including Politics. Academics in these departments, and those in cross-disciplinary fields such as

Criminology, chose to submit to this panel because the title Social Policy identifies their concerns most appropriately.

Social policy issues are high on the agenda for government and for research. The urgency of the issues has influenced the shape and direction of some current research. One non-UK advisor commented on the 'heavily applied bias of research even at the top schools'. There is however evidence also of innovative and creative theoretical work in a number of departments, sometimes carried out by lone scholars and often reflected in the analysis of material from applied research.

Researchers have produced findings which have been used by government and by community bodies. They have shown a capacity to work in partnership with relevant bodies outside the university environment. There is evidence of international involvement and recognition and of collaborative research projects with colleagues and programmes in other countries, especially in Europe.

Social Policy research is distinctive in the extent to which it involves a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. Over time, there have been some changes in the form and content of the discipline or subject area. There have been changes in its boundaries (in relation to cognate subjects) and there have been changes in the methodological approaches commonly adopted. A notable proportion of work in Social Policy draws on other disciplines, especially Sociology, Economics and Political Science.

It is evident that key themes are shared between Social Policy and Administration and Social Work but there are differences in focus as well as methodologies, with research in Social Policy looking more to broader institutional arrangements and research in Social Work focusing more on social processes and groups.

There appears in some areas to have been a coming together of Social Policy and Administration and Social Work but in other areas observable differences remain. Some panel members could see little difference between the work submitted to the two separate units of assessment overall - they thought most would fit within a broad category such as that of Applied Social Science research . Other panel members disagreed, however, and thought that different criteria for each subject area would be appropriate in future.

The focus of current research

In Social Policy and Administration, topics fell mainly into nine broad categories arranged in rough order of prominence.

1 The transformation of the welfare state

2 Social exclusion and poverty

3 Policy development and implementation

4 Crime and criminal justice

5 Comparative social policy

6 Economy and welfare

7 Social relations and social differentiation

8 Service delivery

9 Social Theory and/or Methodology.

The latter theme is not conveniently located on a list of prominence since theoretical work is involved in research across all themes. Social Policy research is conducted through both quantitative and qualitative methodology and the best work may blend contributions from both areas.

Key trends

There appears to be less work being carried out on what used to be seen as core topics in Social Policy, for example on social security, taxation and public expenditure. Related topics now appear under broad themes such as 'poverty and inequality', 'social exclusion' or 'social protection'. The shift has been from evaluating and improving administrative arrangements to focusing attention on underlying social problems and potential or actual innovative means of addressing these.

There has been a growth in attention to issues in Criminology, which is likely to continue, given government interest in this area. Similarly work on comparative cross-national themes is growing as a result of the phenomenon of globalisation and the increasing importance of supra-national institutions of governance, especially in Europe.

Some innovation is observable in the form and content of research: for example, attention to issues of race and ethnicity is producing new and interesting empirical work with direct links to key policy issues.

Strengths

Research in Social Policy combines theoretical and empirical work and the division between basic and applied research is handled well. While there is a bias towards applied work, the submissions do include very good contributions to theoretical developments and to methodology, and high quality individual scholarship is evident across the range of departments and institutions.

Continuing areas of strength include work on poverty, social protection and quality of life and in health, disability, social care, issues of gender and difference, and cross-national comparisons. Work on housing and the environment and on urban issues is also distinctive.

The fact that more attention is being paid to cross-national and international research is welcome. However this has not been to the neglect of important national topics and concerns. There is continuing good work on social service delivery.

There is a notable link between topics chosen for research and regional or national cultures and concerns: this is a particular strength of much of the policy and applied research work submitted to this panel. Not only the topics chosen but fieldwork itself often contain a strong local or regional dimension which would be lost if the connection between research in specific universities and their geographical area were to be severed.

Commendable examples of work

Examples of commendable work include:-

- Research tackling major issues such as crime, inequality or social exclusion
- Research on the grand issues of globalisation or transformation of the social model, involving comparative analysis and utilising large data-sets
- Research on issues which are not necessarily popular with funders or with government but deserve attention - for example, the growing body of work on migration and refugees.
- Good locally-based work and in some cases research involving local engagement, for example in studies of partnership developments.
- Attention to linking research to wider public and professional roles. The detail of RA5/6 testifies to the vitality of research activity in the subject and the public engagement and professional contribution of Social Policy staff and departments.
- Attention to support for research students is in general considerably improved on earlier years and most departments now have sound research environments within which research students can work.

Some institutions (but not as many as might be desirable) showed evidence of investing in the future through support for contract research staff and support for newer entrants to the profession. There was, for example, evidence of support in the form of mentoring and reduced teaching loads.

Weaknesses

Although there are some examples of good practice with regard to dissemination (and activity here is probably better than in some other disciplines) more attention still could be given to ensuring that the results of research are communicated appropriately to wider audiences.

There was less work on disability and less on labour market issues than might have been expected. More attention could be given to integrating quantitative with qualitative approaches.

Research environments

Good policy relevant research work is being carried out in diverse institutional settings, some in traditional university departments and some in research centres, interdisciplinary Schools, in traditional and modern universities, and in colleges of higher education.

There appear to be several different ways in which the research endeavour is organised. For example:- whether departments have central government department/ research council core funding for research centres or not; whether research professors and research officers are involved in teaching or not; the extent of involvement in undergraduate teaching; work loads and student-staff ratios; and the presence or not of sabbatical entitlements, among other supports, all generally related to the amount of funding available for research in each department and differing management practices. All these influence the quantity and quality of research activity in a department. There appears also to be a general trend to organise work in named research centres but also to organise in smaller more flexible clusters within these.

It is also notable that funding sources for Social Policy research are diverse, reflecting evidence of demand for such research from a variety of interests (eg government, research councils, voluntary and other sources). Overall there is evidence of the production of a wide range of publications, including those aimed at prestigious academic audiences and user groups.

Conclusions

Social policy issues remain of central concern in public debate. Social Policy in the UK has a strong tradition and is highly regarded internationally. In responding to old and new concerns, research continues to be distinctively multi-disciplinary. Since 1996, there has been a significant improvement overall in the quality of research outputs and a notable expansion in the extent of research activity in Social Policy. The bands of the rating scale contain a broad range and it is clear that overall there has been improvement within grades as well as some movement between grades.

It appears that those institutions which received most funds after 1996 have, not surprisingly, reinforced their position. There appears to be some evidence of investment and growth at the top end of institutions, with some exceptions. There is some evidence of strength in those institutions which have specialised and have grown over time. While there is growing variety across Social Policy departments as a whole - as the subject has extended its scope and depth - within particular institutions, especially those demonstrating higher quality research outputs, there appears to be a trend towards specialisation, in terms of sub-areas as well as with regard to methodological approach. These developments have led to real achievements: the development of new areas of study; and new theoretical understandings and methodological approaches.