

RESEARCH ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2001 REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE UK SOCIOLOGY PANEL

The Sociology Panel received 48 submissions, ranging in size from 1 to 41 staff. The mean size was 22 staff. Compared with 1996 there were fewer submissions, but with a marked increase in referrals made to it from other Panels (23). Overall the work submitted in 2001 shows a very significant improvement in the international and UK ('national', in RAE grade terms) levels of achievement. During the 1990s a substantial number of Sociology Units have developed a more intense and productive research culture.

The assessments of the Sociology Panel, and that of the Women's Studies Sub-Panel, were augmented by three additional sets of evidence. International Advisers commented on about half the submissions and confirmed that the Panel had been broadly accurate in its identification of 'international' levels of achievement. A User's Sub-Panel assessed the user engagement of all Units placing them into one of three categories. A Special Adviser helped with the specific assessment of 2 Units where no Panellist possessed appropriate specialist expertise.

We will make some observations about the 'Sociology' work of 45 Units, although it should be noted that sociological research is in fact widespread across the social sciences, humanities and management sciences. This will be followed by parallel observations relating to work considered by the Women's Studies Sub-Panel. References to staff numbers in this report are to the number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Category A and A* research active staff.

SOCIOLOGY

These 45 submissions fell into three categories, those rated as 5/5* with very significant amounts of 'international' work, those rated 3a/4 with substantial amounts of 'national' level work, and those rated 2-3b which are viewed by the Panel as 'emerging' Units.

5/5* Well over one-third of Sociology Departments are operating at a significant international level. They range in size from 10 to 41 FTEs (staffing in 5* Units ranges from 23-41 FTEs). These Units are found in 'pre-nineteenth century' universities, in large and small civics and in 1960s English universities. There is at least one such 'international' department in each of England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Most of these Units have received over £1m of research funding, have produced at least a score of doctorates (with up to three score in some places) and have published many substantial scholarly works. These Units have received significant institutional support and are often providing leadership of social science research within their institutions. A number have attracted 'Centre-type' funding from ESRC as well as very significant income from government, the EU and the private sector. Overall these

Units generated some thousands of separate research grants and contracts often involving very significant user engagement. This level of international achievement is particularly noteworthy, with we believe a higher ratio of such departments in the UK than many comparable countries.

3a/4 A little under one-half of the Units are producing significant national level work, with some markers of international achievement. These range in size from 6 to 39 FTE staff. They are found in large and small civic universities, in 1960s universities, in post-1992 universities, and in at least one former College of HE. These Units are predominantly in England, with 3 in Scotland. Such significant national level work has developed in many post-1992 universities where an impressive research culture is being developed. These Units normally have research funding of up to £1m, have produced significant numbers of doctorates and have generated work that is making a very significant contribution to especially UK debates. The Panel anticipates that some of these Units will be producing substantial international level work by the next RAE, especially if they are given greater institutional support that allows an organic research culture to flourish.

2/3b There are 6 'emerging' Units all located in post-1992 universities and HE colleges in England and Northern Ireland. These Units contain between 5 and 18.5 FTE staff but most are quite small. They are normally comprised of researchers from separate institutional sections and appear to lack much support from the wider Institution. The Panel believes that these Units require more core Sociology staffing in order to produce work that will make more significant contributions to future UK and international debates.

Overall the Panel considers that the UK sociology is producing work above its apparent levels of funding and staffing. However, the Panel did identify some problems. Some, especially younger, scholars may be producing 'too many' basic textbooks, review articles and short chapters in edited collections. To provide more opportunities for publishing, we would encourage the development of scholarly publishing outlets, journals that contain longer more research-based articles, and the writing and publishing of material in outlets that are clearly 'national' or 'international'. It should be noted that the RAE Sociology Panel favours research and/or theory that makes its mark at national and/or international levels of excellence.

The Panel also noted that the requirement that Units should submit only to one Panel (with cross referrals elsewhere) produced some difficulties for the quite significant number of 'combined units' in our field; these include sociology plus media studies, sociology plus social policy, sociology plus social work, and so on. The Panel suggests that in future RAEs it should be possible to make 'joint submissions' rather than Units having to choose in terms of perceived 'fit' between a Unit and a Panel.

It is also noticeable that the level and forms of user engagement follows no clear pattern. There is a spread of low and high quality user engagement across Units in very different kinds of HEIs. Indeed user engagement is sometimes high even where there is a limited research culture. The quality of user engagement is critically

dependent upon the interests of staff and their willingness to build a user focus into their research strategy.

Overall the Panel considers that UK Sociology is strong at the research, graduate and user levels, making a major contribution to UK social science. The Panel further believes that this judgement as to the impressive level of achievement needs to be articulated in a more upbeat, confident and intellectually engaged fashion by staff within the various Units, by Heads of Department and by the various professional bodies.

The Sociology Panel

REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE WOMEN'S STUDIES SUB-PANEL

The Women's Studies Sub-Panel was involved in a total of eighteen submissions, which entailed assessing varying amounts of work, from that of a single individual to that of 13 individuals, with a mean of 5.5, and from 2 outputs per submission to 46, with a mean of 17.4. The proportion of outputs within each submission referred to the Sub-Panel ranged from 12% to 100%. Of the submissions considered by the Sub-Panel, 14 were submitted in the first instance to the Sociology Panel, of which 10 were mandatory referrals. The Sub-Panel received only four cross referrals from other Panels, three of which were mandatory. The Women's Studies Sub-Panel worked within the Sociology Panel's criteria. All Sub-Panel members read the full text of the submissions containing referrals to us and additionally read over 50% of the referred outputs in all submissions and in some cases up to 100% of the outputs. Several outputs within every submission were read by more than one member of the Sub-Panel.

The general comments on Women's Studies below necessarily reflect a partial and skewed picture of Women's Studies in the UK, since it is based only on submissions referred to the Sub-Panel. Over 25% of submissions to the Sociology Panel contained work in women's or gender studies and over 20% of submissions to Sociology included mandatory referrals to the Sub-Panel. There is no reason to assume that there is any less Women's Studies research within many other social science and humanities disciplines, yet only four cross-referrals were received from other Panels (from UoAs 40, 41 and 65). There were thus none from the arts and humanities, despite the considerable amount of Women's Studies research within these disciplines, notably in many of the same institutions which referred work within Sociology to the Sub-Panel, produced by scholars who are publicly affiliated to Women's Studies centres within those same institutions. This may, in part reflect the institutional location of Women's Studies, with some of the larger and better known centres being affiliated to Sociology departments. Some of these submissions did include some arts and humanities research (but excluded more from the institution as a whole than was included). Some institutions with long-established and well-known groupings of Women's Studies scholars were not represented in the submissions referred to the Sub-Panel at all. Hence the submissions the Sub-Panel assessed did not reflect the range, vibrancy and worth of research being undertaken within UK Women's Studies, apart from that associated with Sociology units.

UK WOMEN'S STUDIES

Despite the partial view of Women's Studies available to the Sub-Panel, on the basis of submissions received it seems that Women's Studies remains at the cutting edge of academic work in the UK. Women's Studies is not only a multi-disciplinary field but also an interdisciplinary one, with synergies between disciplines fostering innovative work e.g. in area of life writing, life history and auto/biography and in the growing interest in difference and diversity, where Women's Studies arguably leads the field.

Women's Studies is also attracting its share of research funding and research students. The work being undertaken encompasses a broad range from ground-breaking theoretical work to careful empirical studies. There is also some strong applied work, although in some cases more might be achieved here if greater attention were given to disseminating such work in academic arenas and relating it to academic as well as policy agendas. Generally, though, research is being well disseminated in a good range of outputs and in both mainstream disciplinary and interdisciplinary Women's Studies publications. Hence scholars in this field are contributing not only to the advancement of Women's Studies per se, but to discipline based (in terms of the work assessed, mostly sociological) knowledge.

The grades recommended by the Sub-Panel ranged from 2 to 5*.

The majority of those groupings producing substantial work of international quality and graded as 5 or 5* are in pre 1992 universities. Here Women's Studies is affiliated to a Sociology or other unit with a strong research culture within which Women's Studies makes a major contribution to overall excellence in research and clearly receives strong departmental and/or institutional support. This may be read as an encouraging sign, in that a high proportion of the units assessed by the Sub-Panel are producing work of international quality and are doing so in environments where Women's Studies research is valued and recognised.

Those rated 3a/4 are producing substantial work of national excellence with some internationally excellent and again most are parts of larger submissions with sound research cultures. Among these, however, are a few instances where Women's Studies research is not as strong as that of the unit as a whole. There are three discernable reasons for this: where Women's Studies is an emergent research grouping within the unit assessed; where it is marginalised and less well supported than other research in the unit and where key Women's Studies scholars have been dispersed to other UoAs, thus reducing critical mass and diluting the impact their work might have collectively. These 3a/4 graded groupings are located in both pre and post 1992 Universities.

Those units graded 3b/2 are producing some good work of national quality and sometimes a little of international quality, but where present, this international activity constitutes too low a proportion of the overall submission to justify a higher grade. These units are all in post 1992 universities or HE colleges and are lacking sufficient resources and institutional support to develop a strong research culture.

The Women's Studies Sub-Panel