

**RAE 2001: Subject Overview Report**  
UoA 46 Middle Eastern and African Studies

1. The Panel graded in all eleven submissions, one less than in RAE 1996. The Queens University Belfast and Liverpool John Moores University, which were returned to it in 1996, did not submit in RAE 2001. New, however, in RAE 2001 was the University of Wales, Lampeter. The remaining departments (at Birmingham, Cambridge, Durham, Exeter, Leeds, Manchester, SOAS, Oxford, University College London and Edinburgh) were submitted in both exercises. Though these centres can be taken as constituting the core of research being conducted in the United Kingdom in the field of Middle Eastern and African Studies, they by no means represent the sum total of that research. Middle Eastern and African Studies cover a wide range of disciplines (e.g., textual studies, languages, history, theology, politics, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology), and some HEIs chose to submit their Middle East and African researchers to other panels. Panel 46 saw only a small proportion of this work through the system of cross-referral. There was much that it did not see and this makes it difficult for it to generalize about the state of Middle East and African Studies in the UK.

2. Though there was one less submission to Panel 46 for RAE 2001 the FTE category A/A\* staff returned as research active went up from 125 in 1996 to 129 in 2001. Given that for RAE 2001 most departments returned a smaller proportion of their total staff as research active this suggested that the number of staff teaching and researching in Middle Eastern and African Studies in the UK had at least remained constant, if not increased a little.

3. As indicated by the 2001 grades there has been a commendable overall improvement in the quality of the research since 1996. The panel saw more work of clear international excellence than in 1996. That the best of this research was of the highest international standing was fully confirmed by the non-UK based experts consulted. However, the Panel was surprised that a substantial proportion of sub-national work was still being submitted. This suggested that internal monitoring mechanisms within the departments or the HEIs were not always functioning as well as they should, or that staff-development in the area of research was not always effective. The success with which departments addressed the published criteria varied greatly. Some submitted as research in RA2 outputs which the criteria explicitly excluded (e.g. purely editorial work). This pointed to a worrying lack of understanding as to what constitutes research for the purposes of this exercise.

4. Much of the research in Middle Eastern and African Studies in the UK is conducted in small departments. Only two units (SOAS and Oxford at 29 FTEs each) were comparatively large. The remainder submitted 12 or less FTEs. Some departments, despite their smallness, created a vibrant research culture. They managed their research efficiently, created synergy between their individual researchers, attracted a good cohort of doctoral students, whom they integrated into the ongoing research of their departments, and networked effectively with other researchers within their own HEIs and in other HEIs in the UK and abroad. In other words they succeeded in maximizing their research mass, in making the whole more than simply the sum of the individual parts. Other departments, however, still seemed to consist basically of individual researchers working to a significant degree in isolation, with few mechanisms to support them and help them to develop their research. One of the most noticeable differences between the RA5s in

RAE 1996 and in RAE 2001 was the clear move by some departments to more coherent planning and more active management of research, to greater emphasis on staff development, and to increased support for staff and research students.

5. The Panel recognized in its criteria that the backbone of research in Middle East and African studies remains the individual researcher, and it began its process of grading by considering the output of individual researchers as returned in RA2. However, it was surprised not to see more evidence of collaborative, interdisciplinary research. The full possibilities for collaborative research, for crossing disciplinary boundaries and adopting innovative approaches were not always grasped. Approaches tended to be rather traditional (though the quality of some of the outputs adopting these approaches was unquestionably of the highest quality). The total research income for the submitted departments seemed to be comparatively low. There were relatively few large grants in evidence, and not many of these were from the Research Councils or the AHRB. It was not clear whether this was because departments lacked a culture of developing large projects which were rigorous and well enough conceived to gain funding, or because the funding bodies were in some way biased against funding in the fields of Middle Eastern and African Studies.

6. The Panel noted that within the field of Middle Eastern Studies, research on the historical Middle East was strong nationally with a high proportion of those involved in the various aspects of the historical study of the region being deemed international, It recognized, however, that the picture might change if researchers working on the modern Middle East who were submitted to other panels were factored in. It was alarmed to note again, as in 1996, how slender is the national base on which research is being conducted into languages of international importance such as Persian, Turkish and even Arabic.

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