

# **Draft Overview Report on Developments in the European Studies Sector from RAE Panel 48**

Consistent with the Overview Report of the RAE Panel in 1996, this report has two main aims:

1. To identify patterns of continuity and change in the sector by comparing the results of the previous RAEs with those in 2001
2. To consider the relationship between characteristics of units submitted and performance on the rating scale in 2001.

The Panel presents this draft report as a discussion document and welcomes a process of refinement of its conclusions involving discussions with professional associations and individuals who are involved with the development of the sector. Its conclusions are to be viewed as tentative and provisional at this stage.

## **1. Differences, Difficulties and Problems of Comparison**

In making comparisons and commenting on developments in the sector, the Panel is aware of a number of problems, inter alia:

- ? The Panel considers that the rating scale in 2001 is more precise than in earlier RAEs and – not least by reducing the discretion available to Panels – has affected the pattern of results, making it easier for units to move from 4 to 5.
- ? The Panel considers that Universities have exercised greater selectivity in choosing which staff are to be returned, eliminating in the large majority of cases the ‘tail’ of subnational research activity that was such an issue in 1992 and 1996.
- ? In consequence, the Panel found itself usually assessing only an element of the overall research of departments and correspondingly it considers it is not in a good position to comment on developments in the sector as a whole, only on work submitted to it.

In short, the Panel considers that both RAE rules and institutional behaviour have changed in ways that have altered the context in which the Panel has worked in 2001. Comparisons with 1996 and 1992 are accordingly difficult and must be treated with caution.

The Panel faced an additional difficulty. Formally, the sector appeared healthy. There was an increase in the number of units submitting to the Panel (from 30 in 1992 and 38 in 1996 to 41 in 2001). This ran counter to the overall trend in the RAE between 1996 and 2001 and represented the biggest increase in the Umbrella Group Area Studies and Languages (with the exception of Asian Studies and Spanish, numbers of submissions to other Panels in this Group were falling). Moreover, European Studies had the fourth largest number of submissions, just marginally behind French (43) and German (42). With 649 staff submitted, European Studies exceeded French (543) and German (322) and was second to English Language and Literature.

But the Panel was also aware of acute and growing difficulties of recruitment facing many units submitting. So fast was the pace of deterioration that the formal documentation appeared 'historic' rather than an up-to-date picture of the health of the sector. It must be stressed that, other than in some cases requesting an audit of particular submissions to check their veracity, the Panel based its assessments solely on the written documentation submitted. However, the substantial improvements apparent in ratings may well hide a reality of sharp deterioration in the conditions for future research in the sector brought about by sharp contraction, declining morale and painful restructuring. The Panel congratulates the sector for its substantial improvement of performance in research. It is, however, alarmed about current and prospective developments in the sector. The Panel considers that these developments do not reflect HEFCE's wishes and intentions and are a cause for grave concern about the long-term implications not just for higher education but also for the economy, society and polity. In the absence of urgent and large scale action to support the sector the research base in European Studies will wither rapidly, and Britain will lack the resources of foreign language and cultural knowledge and skills necessary to make a success of Britain's role in Europe.

In addition, it is worth noting that the aggregate increase in submissions concealed substantial change in the units submitted. Of the 38 in 1996, some did not resubmit in 2001. Those that were not resubmitted tended to be small, low-performing units in 1996. On the other hand, two of the new submissions in 2001 were relatively large (44 and 25 staff respectively). One new submission to the Panel in 2001 gained a 5\*; three new submissions received a 5. In each of these cases the units had in different forms been submitted to other Panels in 1996 and hence had had experience of the

RAE. Hence though there was substantial continuity, the Panel was dealing with change in the units submitted.

There were some differences in the patterns of work submitted in 2001. The most striking difference was the sharp fall in the proportion of pedagogical research that the Panel had to handle compared to 1996 and 1992. It is possible that more of this work found its way to other Panels that were seen as more appropriate. Equally, this decline may reflect a greater caution on the part of universities in returning this type of work, perhaps prompted by the criticisms leveled by Panels after the RAE in 1996. It would be a matter of regret if the feedback after the last RAE had led to an exclusion of pedagogical research in RAE 2001 when what we sought was an improvement of research in this field.

## **2. Overall Development of Performance 1996-2001**

There was a substantial improvement of overall performance compared to 1992 and 1996. The figures below refer to percentage of submissions gaining particular ratings (rounded off).

	1/2s	3s	4/5/5*
1992	40% (12)	27% (8)	33% (10)
1996	29% (11)	32% (12)	39% (15)

2001	7% (3)	34% (14)	59% (24)
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A more detailed comparison between 1996 and 2001 reveals very clearly the upward movement in ratings (again percentage of submissions, rounded off).

	1	2	3b	3a	4	5	5*
1996	5	24	18	13	21	16	2.6
2001	0.0	7	15	20	17	32	10

Strikingly, 42% of submissions now fall into the 5/5\* band, compared to 18.6% in 1996. It is worth remembering that in 1992 there were just 2 units gaining a 5 (6.6% of submissions). As a percentage of total staff submitted, 55.8% are now in the 5/5\* category (9.4% in the 5\*).

A different picture emerges if we compare the ratings in European Studies with cognate Panels in the Umbrella Group, focusing on the percentages gaining 5 and 5\*

	5	5*
European Studies	32	10
American	23	15
Middle East	25	8
Asian	39	15
Celtic	33	27

English Lit	15	8
French	51	16
German	21	24
Italian	16	16
Russian	41	29
Spanish	22	22

Other than English Literature, American Studies, and Middle East and African Studies, European Studies has the lowest proportion of 5\*. With 42%, European Studies ranks 7<sup>th</sup> out of 11 in the proportion of 5/5\*, just behind German (45%) and Spanish (44%), but well behind Russian (70.6%), French (67%), Celtic Studies (60%) and Asian Studies (54%).

In 1996 the Panel commented that it ‘... was struck by the degree of mobility between 1992 and 1996 and by the overwhelming tendency for this mobility to be in an upward direction.’ This comment applies even more forcefully in 2001. Strikingly, none had gone down from 5/5\*. In total three that had submitted in 1996 had fallen in rating (one from 4 to 3b, one from 4 to 3a, and one from 3b to 2). Only one of the three had gone down two points in the rating scale. Only three submissions fell in the rating scale between 1992 and 1996

More impressive was the upward movement. 18 submissions in 1996 had gained higher ratings in 2001, with three submissions rising two points in the rating scale (two from 3b to 4 and one from 2 to 3a). Two had climbed from 5 to 5\*; five from 4

to 5. Of the eleven submissions that had gained 2 in 1996, six did not resubmit; one stayed at 2; the other four had risen, one of them to 3a

Four of the 'new' universities (five in 1996) improved their rating from 2 to 3a/b in 2001; two from 3a/b to 4. Two 'new' university submissions (one of which had jumped from 1 in 1992 to 4 in 1996) secured 5 in 2001, the only two represented in the 5/5\* category.

One of the most striking characteristics of RAE 2001 was the strong performance by submissions from units specializing in post-Soviet/East European studies. They accounted for two of the four 5\*s and were strongly represented in one of the other 5\*s.

The changes outlined above are testament, as in 1996, to the enormous efforts made by units across the sector to strengthen research performance. They also show just how dynamic research performance is. The ratings in 2001, as in 1996 and 1992, are best seen as frozen images of an ongoing process of upward and downward movements.

The Panel has been struck by the high quality of the research outputs that were submitted for its examination, and the proportions identified as internationally excellent testify to this impression. It should be noted that the Panel's non-UK expert advisers – who looked at all the proposed 5/5\* submissions and a sample of 4s – agreed that the Panel was using appropriate standards of international excellence in assessing submissions.

In addition, it was evident to the Panel that the 1996 RAE exercise debriefings and the lengthy and transparent preparation of the 2001 RAE had generated a learning process in the HE sector about how to play the rules of the game more effectively. There was much greater selectivity in submitting both individual active researchers and outputs. The result was, as mentioned above, that ‘tails’ of subnational researchers and outputs were either eliminated or substantially reduced and, because of the ratings scale, the Panel was in the majority of cases choosing between 4/5/5\*.

Some more specific comments about performance can be made:

- ? Continuing the trend apparent in 1996, institutions showed much greater sophistication in their research planning and monitoring mechanisms and in their staffing policies. There was evidence of more rigorous procedures for research student support and for mentoring of new and younger researchers. Less clear often was the extent to which research students were integrated into the research communities of their institutions.
- ? In some institutions there was evidence that certain research groupings or sub-areas had made significant progress even where the overall grade had not shown significant change. This reflects the targeting of resources and the value added by the identification and development of areas of comparative advantage.
- ? In those instances where the integration of Category C staff into the work of units was clearly evident, their inclusion benefited institutions. But in some cases no

attempt was made to outline the nature of their contribution and how it fitted into the wider aims and work of the unit.

- ? Higher rated units displayed evidence of substantial high-quality research-related networking at European and international levels. This networking seemed more evident in 2001 than in 1996.

### **3. Characteristics of Units Submitted and Ratings Performance**

For the purpose of analysis of ratings performance four characteristics have been identified as potentially significant: size of units; 'new' and 'old' universities; social science versus humanities/languages; and types of organizational structure in units submitted.

#### *Size of Units Submitted*

For the purpose of analysis the Panel identified very small units as 1-5 staff; small as 6-10, medium as 11-20; large as 21-30; and very large as 30+. It should be noted that there were only two very large and three large; all five fell into the 5/5\* category. But, conversely, the eight very small were spread across all points in the ratings scale, albeit with two gaining 2 and two 3b. The eleven small units were similarly spread (though not in 5\*), but with a concentration in 4 (four units) and 3a (three). The seventeen medium-sized were represented in every category except 2, with a concentration (seven) in the 5 category and four in the 3a category. Hence the general

picture is one of wide dispersal of performance by units of a similar size, albeit with evidence of some concentration in the case of small and medium-sized units.

An analysis by rating categories (2-5\*) shows some interesting features:

- ? There was no clear correlation between 5\* and size. Of the four 5\* two were medium-sized, one large and one very small. None were very large.
- ? There was more of a pattern in the case of 5s. Seven of the 13 were medium-sized, two large and two very large. Only one was very small and one small.
- ? Taking the 5/5\* together, of the 17 nine were medium-sized. Otherwise there was some dispersion, with two very large and two very small, and three large and one small. Nevertheless, only three of the 17 were very small or small.
- ? The categories of 2 and 3b showed a disproportionately high representation of very small and small. Of the three 2s two were very small and one small. Of the six 3bs two were very small, two small and two medium-sized.
- ? There were no large or very large units in categories 2-4, only in the 5/5\* categories.

These figures lend themselves to diverse interpretations and should be treated with caution. In particular, we should beware of simply concluding that very small and small units do not perform as well. Often what are identified as small and very small are in practice only part of much larger units in the submitting institutions.

The Panel is not convinced that size is a determining factor in RAE performance, especially given the fact that small submissions can emanate from large structures.

More important is whether the unit exhibits unity in its structure and management, combined with a structure and management that fosters an active staff and postgraduate research culture. The key determinants are quality of research leadership, coherence and sense of direction in research strategy, clear planning and monitoring mechanisms, institutional support for postgraduate development, the quality of, and support for, new appointments, and an active, participatory research culture embracing both staff and postgraduates. The Panel's conclusions are not materially different from those in 1996.

#### *'New' and 'Old' Universities*

The Panel distinguished between 'traditional civics', 'postwar, technological' and 'new' universities. These three categories were represented as follows: 12 submissions from 'traditional', 11 from 'postwar' and 18 from 'new' universities. There was as in 1996 a relatively high proportion of 'new' universities. This high proportion of 'new' universities may well account for the lower proportion of 5/5\*s in European Studies compared to most other Panels in the Umbrella Group, for reasons that are made clear below.

The 'new' universities are more strongly represented in the lower categories of the ratings. They account for 100% of the 2s, for 67% of the 3bs (four of six), for 87.5% of the 3as (seven of eight), and for 42.9% of the 4s (three of seven). Their representation is weaker amongst the 5/5\*s, where they account for 15% of the 5s (two out of 13) and none of the 5\*s. On the other hand, we should note that eleven 'new' universities improved on their 1996 ratings, that in 2001 for the first time this

part of the sector was represented in the 5 category, and that two units from this sector rose by two points.

In contrast, the 'traditional' universities make up 47% of the 5/5\* category (the 'new' universities 11.8%), and 75% of the 5\*s. They represent only one of the six 3bs and one of the eight 3as and are not to be found amongst the 2s. On the other hand, two of the 12 'traditional' universities had lower ratings than in 1996 (out of a total of three units with lower scores).

As in 1996, the 'postwar, technological' universities are well represented amongst the 5/5\*s. In fact they account for a higher proportion of the 5s than the civics (46% compared to 38%), providing six of the 13. This was roughly the same as their performance in 1996. One from this part of the sector gained for the first time a 5\*. Overall, the 'postwar' universities made up 41% of the 5/5\* category (compared to 47% 'traditional'). This group of universities has consolidated a strong position in the sector.

### *Social Sciences versus Humanities/Languages*

Here the Panel's observations are consistent with those made in 1996. The very nature of European Studies as a coming together of humanities/languages/social science work makes it difficult, if not impossible to operate this classification as a useful discriminator of performance. In some units humanities/languages work added disproportionately to the strength of the submission; in some, the main strengths lay

clearly in the social sciences; whilst in others the two areas were in approximate balance.

Of the four 5\*, two were social scientific, one humanities/languages, and one mixed.

In the 5 category, the vast majority of submissions were mixed.

Amongst the 4s, humanities/languages submissions predominated.

Some patterns can be discerned. Just under 50% of humanities/languages submissions tended to cluster in the 4 category. No such clustering was evident amongst social science submissions which were spread across the 5\*, 5, 3a and 3b categories fairly evenly. 50% of mixed submissions fell into the 5 category; there was another clustering of mixed submissions in the 3a category.

Overlaying the issue of social science versus humanities and languages was the strong performance by submissions focused on the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

#### *Relation of Performance to Internal Structures*

Some units submitted represented distinct organizational structures with a measure of academic autonomy and control over their own resources; others were parts of bigger structures; whilst others were compilations of researchers from different structures for the purpose of the RAE return. The Panel's observations are as follows:

- ? Of the 17 with 5/5\*, four approximated closer to research institutes than teaching and research departments
- ? The large majority of 5/5\*s had distinct organizational structures with clear evidence of autonomy

Consistent with the Panel's views in 1996, the conclusion seems to be that distinct organizational structures and autonomy are essential but not sufficient preconditions for strong performance in the RAE. Units with these characteristics were also to be found at the lower end of the rating scale. Distinct organizational structures and autonomy make more possible the cultivation and maintenance of active research cultures. The potential is enhanced for coherent and sensitive research planning and for evolving a team-based approach based on clarity of focus. They do not however guarantee research leadership.

The evidence also points to the importance of sustained research leadership in relatively stable units over time in strengthening research performance. It also points to the rewards from sustained support from the institutional context. What is less clear in the evolving context of financial difficulties and staff retrenchment in European Studies is whether universities will continue to offer this support in the future. A major question arises about the continuing sustainability of the improved research performance in European Studies that we have seen in the 1992, 1996 and 2001 RAE exercises. This issue will need to be addressed urgently by the relevant professional associations.

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