

Overview Report of the RAE 2001 English Language and Literature Panel

Eighty-nine institutions submitted to UoA 50, English Language and Literature: the total number of staff in categories A and A* was 1,526 FTE. During the exercise, the Panel met on seven occasions between June 1999 and October 2001, over a total of ten days. The assessment phase constituted an intense six-month period of extensive reading, consultation with other Panels and Panel meetings, following the working methods set out in the Panel's criteria. The Panel Chair and Secretary went to briefing meetings and to three meetings of the Umbrella Panels for cognate subject areas.

All Panel members read every submission document in its entirety. Panel members were assigned in pairs to make detailed, preliminary reports on groups of twelve to thirteen institutions, each group being geographically diverse and including various kinds of institution. Panel members aimed to read as many outputs as possible, never less than one output for each individual returned and usually three or four. After our first substantive meeting, at which there was broad agreement, some twenty-five institutions were reconsidered by a second pair. Additional reading of outputs was undertaken. At a later stage some institutions were considered by a third pair. Advice was also sought from other panels in addition to mandatory cross referrals and cross referrals sought by the Panel itself. At the final meeting the Panel returned to the remaining unresolved cases, took into account the advice of its non UK based advisers, and gave consideration to the overall pattern of grading.

The Panel noted the considerable improvement in the quality of submissions, both in terms of presentation and substance, since the 1996 RAE. We were impressed by the vitality and variety of research outputs submitted and the research culture in a majority of institutions. The Panel noted the continuing significant improvement in research in English in some post-1992 institutions and the very creditable work undertaken in some smaller institutions.

The Panel recognised that English in some institutions is part of a larger academic grouping, and that it saw only a proportion, though a large one, of the work being done in English. Some institutions chose to submit relevant work to other panels: this figure has not been quantified. Young staff recruited are of high quality and show much promise: institutions in general support them well, though the problem of short term contracts coupled with heavy teaching remains a problem for some new entrants. The panel noted the inclusion of category C staff in many submissions and their active contribution to the research culture in most cases.

The overall number (89) of submissions to the English panel was virtually the same as in 1996 (91), though in a small number of cases submissions were new and a few HEIs which submitted to UoA 50 in 1996 chose not to do so in 2001. Growth areas since 1996 include creative writing and English language studies and linguistics. In the latter the work is diverse, ranging from the interface with literature to the history of the language to computational and corpus linguistics. Creative writing is developing as an important element within English departments, and this has been assessed in accordance with the

provision in RAE 2/99, in so far as it represents “the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances where these lead to new or substantially improved insights”.

While individual research remains central to the subject, there has been an increase in collaborative and interdisciplinary work, and English is hospitable to interdisciplinary studies. Electronic publishing has increased and some interesting journals have been established since 1996: work published through this medium was assessed on equal terms with that in hard copy (though some proved difficult to access).

There seems to be less research into pre twentieth-century American literature than might have been expected (a view confirmed by the Chair of the American Studies Panel) and there is relatively little work on comparative European literature. Although much powerful research in medieval language and literature was put before the Panel, it was noted that this is becoming concentrated in fewer institutions and that in some cases those retiring or resigning are not being replaced. It was also noted that although the study of Irish literature is popular throughout the UK, that of Welsh writing in English was almost totally confined to Wales, and Scottish literature largely confined to Scotland.

The panel noted that although there are a large number of PhD students in English, indicating the subject’s continuing popularity, the numbers are not matched by funded studentships. The growth in studentships funded by HEIs and the funding councils has not met the demand and many postgraduate students are self-funded. English at postgraduate level is a thriving but under-funded area.

Submissions by most institutions describe well-developed support structures for graduate students supported by an impressive amount of training. The AHRB’s insistence on timely completion seems to have resulted in an increase in the number of doctorates awarded.

Since the last RAE, the research culture in English has been significantly enhanced by the increase in funding from the AHRB, the Leverhulme Trust and other bodies. The basic unit of research remains the individual scholar: the AHRB leave schemes have had a positive effect, increasing the amount of research time available. This has been of particular benefit to younger members of the profession. Funding for large projects by both the AHRB and the Leverhulme Trust has been of substantial importance for English. The recently established interdisciplinary AHRB centres should result in further enhancement during the next RAE period. Nevertheless, although this rise in research income is to be welcomed, the failure to win funding even of projects rated at A+ by AHRB peer reviews demonstrates the need for further funding to keep pace with the growing diversity and quality of research in English in the UK.

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