

Report of the French Panel (UoA 51) on the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise

The exercise was conducted along broadly the same lines as in 1996, with some innovations such as the consultation exercise on panel-specific guidelines, the referral of provisional 5 and 5* ratings to a group of non-UK based experts, and the opportunity for HEIs to stipulate items to be cross-referred. The French Panel welcomed the input on our guidelines and hoped that the consultation was found helpful by the HEIs; and we were reassured by the non-UK experts' overall endorsement of our provisional ratings. Relatively little use was made of the mandatory cross-referral procedure.

The Panel was pleased to record substantial instances of international and national excellence in all of the key subject areas covered. In the area of **language studies** there was a very significant rise in overall quality: more single-authored books were submitted and articles were published in a wider range of high quality international journals. There was also, however, an equally significant drop in the total number of items entered in this field, in particular in the area of pedagogic research. This may be due in part to changing patterns of submissions to panels, but would appear also to be the result of decisions made by HEIs to exclude individuals working in this area. The Panel was also concerned at the lack of renewal: the 2001 names are very much the 1996 names reduced in number. In the **medieval** field, while there is still an emphasis on editorial work among more senior scholars, the volume of critical monographs submitted has increased markedly. The range of topics was very wide: although Anglo-Norman remains understandably at the heart of British medieval studies, Occitan is also flourishing, and there is much good work being done in the 14th and 15th centuries as well as in the more popular earlier ones. While some younger scholars are establishing promising research careers, appointments are regrettably not keeping pace with retirements. **Renaissance, 17th- and 18th-century studies** are thriving, with major projects in textual scholarship, bibliography and history of the book; history of ideas was well represented with some impressive work combining erudition with insight and imaginative breadth; there was also a significant body of innovative work in the reevaluation of canonic texts together with fruitful exploration beyond the limits of the canon. There was some excellent literary criticism in a traditional mode, although some work of this kind was unambitious or mainly descriptive. The more theoretically oriented work was similarly various, but there were cases where the traditional virtues of scholarship were combined with theoretical sophistication to outstanding effect. The only question is whether there is sufficient new blood in these areas: first-time appointments continue to be made, but some major departments no longer have early modern specialists, and it remains to be seen whether current graduates will form a new generation to replace those who will retire in the next decade. **Nineteenth-century** studies include a significant amount of outstanding editorial work, with several U.K. scholars collaborating on an international basis. Excellent work is also being done on aspects of French history and thought during the period. In literary studies there has been a valuable broadening of perspective, particularly in the study of literature in relation to the other arts. While a small number of well-known authors have fallen into relative neglect, several others have been usefully rediscovered, in ways which will encourage further research. The underlying methodology has been predominantly positivist and exegetical in character, but there was encouraging evidence of more

innovative critical approaches also being profitably applied. In the area of **twentieth-century literature**, we noted a pleasing degree of breadth and innovation that has successfully pushed back the limits of the established canon, although conversely some genres, notably poetry, were relatively neglected - as were some major writers; there was, however, impressive research on, for instance, Proust, the Nouveau Roman, and autobiography; and UK academics are contributing strongly in such fields as new women's writing, travel writing, and crime fiction. **Francophone** and **postcolonial** studies, while remaining of somewhat variable quality, have developed and diversified and are producing some really distinguished work. In modern **thought and philosophy**, the best work is sophisticated and expertly researched; other work has played a significant role in making the often difficult ideas of major thinkers in France accessible to wider informed debate within the humanities as a whole. The contribution of academics in the UK to the international scene has been original and illuminating. Research into French **film** has established itself as an integral and relevant area of academic study making a strong contribution to the discipline as a whole. In particular it has opened up numerous aspects of recent French cinema for sustained textual, historical and cultural analysis. **Cultural Studies** itself has developed considerably, drawing on research in philosophy, gender, film, and literary studies. Much good work is being done on the cultural impact of social and historical movements and events, the understanding of popular genres and the interactions of musical, artistic, literary, and social texts characteristic of particular periods. In **Gender Studies** the study of films, writings, and social texts and situations framed by the themes and questions of feminist theory and queer theory has brought new works into the cultural canon; but the best research went beyond the investigation of new material, often rather narrowly defined, and combined a wealth of detailed knowledge with impressive imaginative scope and theoretical rigour. The Panel's perspective on the current state of **political, social and historical studies** is limited by the fact that a large proportion of this work went to the European Studies Panel; in particular, departments where this is the dominant emphasis seem on the whole to have submitted to European Studies, whereas less than a quarter of departments submitting to French had more than one researcher in the field. The fact that many of the biggest and most prestigious French departments in the UK are not producing research in this field is somewhat disappointing for the development of interdisciplinarity in French Studies.

The Panel used the working methods set out in our guidelines. Submissions were considered in the round in order to achieve a balanced assessment, but particular attention was paid to the RA2 outputs. The Panel in fact read in detail somewhat more than the 75% of these to which we had committed ourselves. We were impressed by the overall quality and range of what we read, but would wish to express some concern over certain recurrent problems. For instance, some items submitted were broadly pedagogic in character. (If this indicates that publishers are increasingly seeking books that will sell to students, rather than research monographs, it implies a tension between the aims of RAE and the demands of the market which needs to be addressed.) Where such items clearly embodied research outcomes, they were rated accordingly, but assessment was more difficult when they seemed rather to represent a resume of existing scholarship, and - despite our explicit request - not all submissions clearly specified the research element in this type of publication. Similarly, in the case of collaborative publications the share of contribution was not always stated. Finally, in a number of other cases, what appeared as two separate RA2

items turned out to be in effect the same piece of research entered twice (e.g., as an article and as part of a book): the Panel would strongly discourage this practice.

We noted that graduate studies continue to be underfunded, and that this poses a grave threat to the future of the discipline. We hope that institutions will continue to provide graduate studentships wherever possible, and to introduce graduate teaching assistantships where these do not already exist. It was clear, too, that institutions were deriving significant benefits both from refining the organisational structures within which research is carried out and from increasing research support, particularly study leave entitlement. We consider it extremely important that there should be sufficient transparency in the financial administration of universities for individual departments to be able to see how an improvement in the quality of their research might be rewarded by enhanced funding.

Approximately 30% of the individuals entered were judged to be of international excellence, an increase of 7% on the 1996 exercise. This is in part attributable to a shift in the pattern of submissions: the total number of Category A and A* individuals entered in RA2 decreased by 5.5% (seven HEIs who had submitted to the French Panel in 1996 did not do so, while three submitted to French for the first time). Nevertheless, the Panel was pleased to note that there has also clearly been a real improvement in the quality of research produced in French Studies across the UK.