

RAE 2001

Panel 52: German, Dutch and Scandinavian Languages

OVERVIEW REPORT

The Panel received 42 submissions, covering 322 researchers of whom 264 were in category A or A*. The number of research outputs considered by the Panel was 1,092, virtually all of which were read collectively by at least two Panel Members in accordance with its published working methods; a small number of items were referred elsewhere for expert advice. The Panel also read a large number of outputs cross-referred from other Panels, notably European Studies (Panel 48). As indicated in the Panel's assessment criteria, prime consideration was given to the quality of the published outputs, but in determining the final ratings the Panel also had regard to such factors as the numbers of postgraduate research students, the number of research degrees awarded, the number of competitive postgraduate awards obtained and the level of institutional funding of postgraduates, the level of external research funding received, and details about the research environment, achievements and strategies of each Unit of Assessment.

The Panel awarded the following ratings:

5*	10
5	9
4	15
3a	5
3b	3
2	0
1	0

The Panel was gratified to find that its allocation of the 5*, 5, and 4 grades found broad agreement among the Non-UK Advisers whose opinion was sought towards the end of the assessment process.

The Panel had prepared its criteria and assessment procedures with great care, and was rigorous in applying these during the actual assessment process. Though preparations for the RAE had extended over many months, the assessment period itself was extremely short, imposing a very heavy burden on the Panel Members, not least because the beginning of the work coincided with the examination period. Members were faced with a heavy reading programme, the bulk of which had to be completed by mid-July. The assessments were determined during a two-day meeting in July, a further two-day meeting in September, and confirmed at a final meeting in October 2001.

The Panel's remit covered a very wide range: from runology to contemporary literary theory, many areas of linguistics, the whole range of literature from the Middle Ages to the present day, principally in German, but also in Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch and Yiddish. Work was also submitted in history, theology, philosophy, law, sociology, archaeology, film and cultural studies, and various other fields. Outputs were submitted in English, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic, Hungarian, and Spanish. With their collective expertise, members of the Panel were able to assess a very high proportion of the outputs themselves; apart from a few 'mandatory cross-referrals' (requested by institutions), only a very small number of outputs needed to be cross-referred to other Panels or to specialist advisers for help with assessment.

The Panel was delighted to find that overall there was a clearly discernible increase in high-quality research in the disciplines within its purview. A large number of the research outputs were decidedly of international quality while most of the remainder reached the Panel's standard of national excellence. Only a small proportion was clearly of sub-national standard. Institutions are now generally much more aware of the need to put forward only serious researchers for assessment.

The Panel was pleased to note that several very small units were able to make submissions and sustain high-quality research. Notwithstanding the generally high level of achievement, the Panel is concerned that some larger departments appear to be seeking to derive financial benefit through including some researchers in their submission whose work was of sub-national standard. Small departments, on the

other hand, cannot risk this approach. The Panel also noted that although reasons for the omission of some category A staff were generally supplied, the explanations were not always fully satisfactory.

Given that many Modern Language departments submitted to European Studies (Panel 48), it is difficult to know how representative the work we saw was of the whole range of current work in our disciplines in the UK. In the field of German Studies it was evident that there is a strong trend towards twentieth-century and particularly contemporary German studies, though we were pleased to find that there is still a substantial body of excellent work being produced in such fields as medieval and early modern literature, the eighteenth century, and the history of the German language. Some relatively new fields, such as Film Studies, are clearly flourishing in a number of institutions. Despite the apparent health of the subject, however, the Panel is far from sanguine about its long-term prospects. The number of institutions that maintain a wide range of German studies is shrinking. In particular the outlook for Medieval Studies gives cause for concern. As far as we could ascertain from the submissions, there are currently no active researchers in permanent posts in this area under thirty years of age, only three under forty, and five between forty and fifty. Given the rich heritage of the Middle Ages in Germany, we recommend that institutions give urgent consideration to future support for this area of scholarship. Attention must also be given to the protection of small subjects such as Dutch, the individual Scandinavian languages, and Yiddish.

Though the bulk of the research submitted represented the outcomes of individual research projects, the Panel was pleased to note a considerable amount of joint or collaborative work, often of an interdisciplinary nature, frequently involving colleagues from other UK or overseas universities. Such work is leading to a welcome widening and diversification of research activity. Nevertheless, individual projects and publications remain at the heart of research in the field, as some of the very best work testifies. As many submissions show, both approaches may interact fruitfully, good collaborative work within, across and between institutions sustaining and feeding into individual work.

Growth in numbers of postgraduate research students is slow. In most institutions, numbers are small. The Panel was pleased to note that departments are providing good support with research training.

The Panel felt that institutions did not always use the opportunities available to them to use their submissions to best effect. In a number of cases, institutions failed to submit the *required* statements on the precise nature of the research element embodied in those outputs where this is not immediately apparent. This applied in particular to grammars, language teaching materials, and translations; where the required statement was lacking, the Panel took particular care to establish the level of research content. Furthermore, the Panel found that in many cases the accounts of the arrangements for monitoring research, of the research environment, the research strategy and plans (RA5 and RA6) were excessively long, often hyperbolic ('a major project ...', etc.), and yet not very informative. It was also sometimes difficult to relate the information provided here to the details given about research plans in the RA6s from RAE 1996, which had also been made available to the Panel. In some cases apparent discrepancies were noted between the information given about postgraduate numbers, the numbers of doctorates awarded, postgraduate awards, and external funding in forms RA3a, RA3b and RA4 on the one hand and in the discursive parts of the submissions (RA5, RA6) on the other. It is evident that more guidance needs to be given on what constitutes an 'esteem factor'.

The Panel noted that most (but by no means all) institutions recognise that they must give their good researchers support, whether financial or through the provision of study leave and other facilities. At the same time, the Panel found evidence to suggest that some academic managers use the RAE to put undue pressure on their good researchers, without offering them sufficient support for their work. It seems that not all institutions are aware that there is currently a national need for well-qualified Modern Language specialists.

The Panel is aware that the RAE imposes on departments a need to strive to achieve continuous improvement in the quality of research outputs. While a rising curve may be desirable, it must be recognised that this puts younger colleagues in particular under considerable pressure to enhance their performance. This may, however, be counter-productive in that it encourages premature publication. On the other hand, it was evident that, since the last RAE, a significant number of posts have been filled by outstanding young researchers, in whose hands the future of the subject looks secure. Most of these new appointees have already demonstrated their ability to produce good research and to publish regularly; they are generally being carefully nurtured and given good opportunities for study leave and

other kinds of research support by their institutions. Several institutions have clearly made considerable efforts to renew their research base after achieving modest results in the 1996 RAE. It is evident that such schemes as the AHRB/British Academy schemes for research leave, as well as schemes for national and local support of postgraduate study, are paying good dividends.

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