

RAE 2001

Panel 53: Italian

OVERVIEW REPORT

1. The Assessment Process

The Panel received submissions from 19 Italian departments (and five items from two colleagues in an Institute of the School of Advanced Study of the University of London, as well as the Italian items from a French department). Six other Italian units were submitted under Modern Languages to Panel 48, European Studies. We feel however that the publications we examined were representative of our discipline in general in the UK (considering also that many of the submissions to Panel 48 were cross-referred to us).

All the research outputs (431) of the 116 members of staff (all categories) directly submitted to our Panel were read. Most items on film were read by our Panel, but a few of these, as well as four items on psychoanalysis, were sent to specialist advisers.

The 19 departments we assessed ranged from small units of three researchers to larger ones with 10, 12, or 15 members. Most commonly there were units of four or five scholars. Category C staff who were well integrated into the activities of the department were appropriately submitted and often made a positive contribution to the profile of a unit. Occasionally departments inflated their numbers with outside colleagues who did little or nothing to improve their profile, or included young researchers who had no publications, and whose contribution to the research of the department was hard to determine.

In accordance with our assessment criteria, most importance was given to the quality of publications, but we also considered very carefully the additional information presented in forms RA3 to RA6. We had three sessions in which we considered the grades, the last one after the Areas and Modern Languages Umbrella Panel meeting at which the provisional grades in cognate areas were made available to panel chairs and secretaries. We were able to review our own grades in the light of this information and of discussion of the RAE grade definitions at the Umbrella Panel meeting. The non-UK advisers, who were given an awkward task, as they were not expected to read research outputs (in fact were not allowed the time to do so), could only give generic judgements, but were largely in agreement with our provisional grades. We took their comments into account at our final meeting.

We noted with satisfaction that, as in the past, some small units performed as well as larger ones, even though often working in more difficult conditions. Given these difficult conditions we would urge their institutions to find ways of helping them maintain the high level of their research. We awarded the following grades:

Grade	No of submissions	No of researchers submitted
3b	1	5
3a	1	5
4	8	3, 3, 3, 4, 4, 4, 5, 12
5	3	5, 6, 7
5*	6	4, 5, 7, 10, 10, 15

2. Areas of Research

The areas of research were very numerous and included language and linguistics, philology, ecdotics, history of printing, literary studies – from mediaeval and Renaissance (including neo-Latin) to the modern period – historical, political and social studies, film, theatre and media studies, cultural studies, translation studies, philosophy, intellectual history, history of art and history of taste, psychoanalysis, women and gender studies, critical theory. Research in linguistics covers a broad range of topics, which include detailed syntactic/semantic/sociolinguistic analyses of Italian and other Italo-Romance varieties (from both the synchronic and diachronic perspectives) as well as the history of linguistics. The list of research areas may look impressive, but there is great imbalance between the different areas and periods studied. In particular, contemporary literature/history/society/culture are strong favourites. In literary studies there is concentration on modern narrative (often with considerable emphasis on certain major authors, most notably Calvino); while, in the less cultivated fields of modern poetry and theatre, the emphasis is again on the best-known figures like Montale and Fo. In earlier centuries Dante prevails in the Middle Ages, with little research being done on his predecessors or his contemporaries, or on the other major figures of Boccaccio and Petrarch. Some excellent scholars are working on the Renaissance, but they are very few (and major authors like Ariosto, Castiglione and Machiavelli are largely neglected). There is little work on the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (apart from studies on Leopardi). Literary research sometimes lacked a critical and analytical foundation and some contributors failed to provide an adequate basis in contextual intellectual enquiry. In some cases, the Panel wondered whether the pressures of the RAE had led to premature publication of research.

In the areas of history/society/culture, there are lines of research which lead from the early modern to the contemporary period: for instance the study of women in religious orders and the position of women in minority religions in Italy, as well as the role of women during fascism. Also crossing the centuries, there is research highlighting an awareness of different forms of historical narrative – the stimulating result of cross-fertilization between history, philosophy, literature and the fine arts, covering areas from the Trecento to the present, and ranging from the sociology of space in mediaeval Florence to the urban studies of Milan, to policing in Bologna, to Southern stereotypes and to the concept of charisma. There is also more mainline historical research, but what is prevalent in various Italian departments is the interdisciplinary approach. This enjoys a freedom greater perhaps than in literary studies, which seem sometimes to be constrained by the limits of traditional topics and methods. The study of film, a relatively new initiative for Italian departments, is becoming more widespread and seems to be reaching a high level of attainment.

Looking to the future of the departments, it would seem essential that, at least in the large-to-medium size units, the fullest possible coverage of Italian Studies should be maintained. As colleagues retire or move elsewhere it is imperative not only for their posts to be filled, but also for the issue of coverage to be taken into consideration. It goes without saying that institutions are encouraged also to give support to small units that suffer staff losses, otherwise in the long run their research profiles will be seriously weakened. The balance of the discipline must be kept in mind, so that areas do not wither, resulting in intellectual impoverishment and in the departments becoming less stimulating for both staff and students. The possibility of eventually teaching over a wide range of areas would also encourage postgraduates to choose freely their topics of research, instead of being limited by the narrowing of the field to the modern period.

3. Standard of Research

There is very fine work being done in all areas, perhaps consistently higher in Dante studies and in fields which compared to the past are less frequented, and therefore require a more deliberate choice, like linguistics and philology, ecdotics, history of printing, Renaissance thought, the poetic and dramatic tradition and interdisciplinary and historical studies.

There are several collaborative ventures which have produced very good results, but, in the main, the research is individual and depends on libraries and time rather than large-scale grants and collaboration, which do not necessarily lead to better research. In the present climate of teaching and administrative overload, small grants are important in allowing colleagues to take sabbaticals to carry research forward, but it is also up to institutions and departments to organize themselves in order to reduce the conflict between teaching/administrative tasks and research.

The standard of younger colleagues and postgraduates is high, promising well for the future. Several departments note that their postgraduates have authored books and articles. In addition many doctoral theses have been turned into first-class monographs. However, alongside high quality research, there are also publications which cause concern. The pressure to publish sometimes results in hasty output and discourages colleagues from embarking on major, long-term projects, like critical editions, of which in this RAE there were extremely few (although of excellent standard). There is also the tendency to publish the proceedings of round-tables and conferences, however slight, in order to boost output numbers. If the RAE is to promote excellence in research, it needs to address and find ways of countering these negative effects.

4. Context

On the whole RA5 and RA6 were well organized and helpful. But we noticed that some departments presented a too subjective account of their work and achievements. A clear, factual account would have been more appropriate.

We have already noted that success in obtaining grants is not necessarily an indicator of good research, and the same can be said of national or international collaboration. Clearly contacts with the national and international world of scholars is crucial, but such contacts are achieved in many ways, and not necessarily in the more traditional one of constant presence at conferences. There were certain collaborative enterprises which seemed especially positive, like the joint research programmes which benefit staff and postgraduates alike (Gruppo 62 of the northern universities, the Bristol-Manchester linguistics project, the Oxford-Cambridge link, the Reading-UCL one, and the Birmingham-Warwick one). We also noted the important benefits of inviting outside scholars and writers and organizing additional activities like round-tables and seminar series, which enrich the life of a department and of the discipline as a whole. This may be done on an *ad hoc* basis, or through a centre as in the case of the Leopardi Centre in Birmingham, the Centre for Italian Women's Studies in Reading, the Centre for Italian Studies at UCL, and the Incontro di Dialettologia at Bristol.

When we came to evaluate the importance of postgraduate numbers we were careful to link this to the size and profile of the department. We noticed that most departments seemed to have good research training in place, with support from their institutions to monitor the progress of both postgraduates and junior researchers. We feel that some departments have a natural advantage in recruiting postgraduates because of their location and size. Given the small number of AHRB grants, institutions with the right support system, but which have relatively few postgraduates in Italian, should be encouraged to invest in targeted studentships, so that postgraduates could be more evenly distributed geographically. (Some universities already do this.) There have been positive developments in providing taught MAs that can lead to research degrees, and those universities which allow theses to be written in Italian benefit by being able to accept excellent postgraduates from Italy, alongside their British counterparts. In order to make an academic career more attractive and to ensure that, in future, our departments will be able to recruit high calibre scholars, it would be important to increase the number of post-doctoral positions, of which, according to the submissions we read, there are at the moment very few.

5. Future Plans

The section on research strategy had only limited value. This is not because it will be difficult in the future to check whether plans have been carried out or not, but because very ambitious, detailed plans are frequently unconvincing. Research has a momentum of its own and it often takes the scholar in unexpected directions. What is planned as a book may well turn out to be more suitable for a series of articles, and vice versa, while a lateral interest may develop into a major study. So the projects which showed a sense of reality and flexibility seemed to us the most satisfactory. These can of course include research committed to major projects which may take 10 to 15 years to complete (it would reassure us that the RAE was working properly if there were more of these). Departments and universities which try to extract from their colleagues a fixed number of books and articles, even directing them to specific outlets (types of periodicals and publishers, in the UK or in Italy) seemed to us to make a mockery of scholarly activities. Having said that, it is clearly helpful to plan ahead and to help younger colleagues to formulate their priorities. Some departments struck an intelligent balance.

6. Conclusion

In spite of the reservations we have voiced in this overview, our general impression is positive. At its best, Italian research in the UK seems to be of an international quality comparable to the levels reached in Italy and in North America. The grades achieved by departments reflect the higher standard of the research submitted, compared to 1996, and the stronger emphasis on the encouragement and monitoring of research together with the greater concern for the research context in which colleagues are working. More steps should be taken to encourage postgraduate and post-doctoral students; staff numbers must be maintained and in some small departments should be increased, and the breadth of interests which is one of the most valuable features of Italian research in the UK should be actively encouraged and protected.

Professor Laura Lepschy
Panel Chair
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