

UoA54: Russian, Slavonic and East European Languages

Volume of research submitted

The panel noted that the number of institutions submitting to UoA54 had fallen from 21 in 1996 to 17 in 2001. One institution which retains a strong presence in the area had submitted to another panel; one which had previously submitted elsewhere had submitted to UoA54 this time; and four institutions which had submitted to UoA54 in 1996 made no submission in Slavonic Studies in 2001. For the first time Wales and Northern Ireland were unable to provide research for assessment by this unit. The panel was aware of a small number of institutions whose research in the Eastern European and Slavonic areas had been submitted to other Units of Assessment and was not cross-referred to UoA54, but believed that if cross-referrals from other panels were included, then it had received an almost complete impression of the state of the subject. The reduction in numbers of submissions was in no way compensated by any increase in size of units, and there is evidence of a distinct quantitative reduction in research. Small units are the norm, with several consisting of only one or two researchers; no submission to UoA54 included a number of Category A researchers in double figures. It was therefore considered inappropriate to penalise units for the lack of broad coverage which inevitably results from small size, provided there was evidence of adequate institutional support (which was not always the case).

Quality of research submitted

The panel applied rigorously its criterion that the quality of the publications returned in RA2 would provide the principal basis for assessment. The overall results from this process show a substantial improvement on the results from 1996, with over 50% of submissions receiving 5 or 5*. This is thought to be partly the result of the process of selection that is expressed in the reduced number of submissions, and partly of better management of research. In some institutions it was noted that there had been a substantial, sometimes a complete, turnover of staff. The high quality of research is also due in no small measure to the age profile of the staff submitted, many of whom are long established researchers nearing the end of their careers. As noted below, high quality research was not equally distributed between different disciplines.

Distribution of research topics

The research submitted was found to be very unevenly distributed among the disciplines covered by the Unit of Assessment. The best represented discipline is Russian literature and culture, which accounted for nearly half the outputs submitted in RA2. Within that discipline, twentieth-century literature and culture is most extensively researched, with the study of film showing development, while research in nineteenth-century literature, though still extensive, is concentrated on a relatively small number of writers. The panel was struck by the very small number of items devoted to pre-Petrine Russian culture, and by the modest amount of research on the eighteenth century and on such topics as intellectual history. In literary and cultural theory the study of the Bakhtin school has burgeoned in recent years, but other theorists and schools are largely neglected. A substantial quantity of high-quality research is being conducted in linguistic topics, particularly in relation to the modern Russian language. While there are grounds for satisfaction at the extent and quality of

research on twentieth-century Russian literature and language, the relative lack of research in other areas of Russian Studies was felt by the panel to be a matter of some concern. This concern was felt even more intensely, however, in relation to the level of research in the other areas within the panel's remit. Research in both the languages and literatures of the non-Russian Slavonic areas, as well as of the non-Slavonic areas of Eastern Europe, showed a marked decline in relation to 1996. Some universities have completely stopped research in these areas, indeed some areas have almost completely disappeared from the research map of the UK. The panel made a point of noting favourably the institutions where non-Russian disciplines had been retained, but could not avoid observing that the average quality of research in these areas was disappointingly low. The panel had the benefit of a contribution from a member of the user community, who expressed particular concern over the lack of research expertise in the cultures of the Balkan peninsula (the study of Bulgaria has almost completely disappeared, for instance) and even of some of the first-wave accession states to the EU. While it is known that experts in other disciplines such as economics and politics maintain an active interest in these areas, it has to be pointed out that cultural understanding is crucial to relations with such countries, and that it can be provided only by the language-based studies that UoA54 represents. It is clear that the research conducted in the UK in these areas is no longer sufficient to provide for national needs. It is noted with regret that the encouragement given to research in these areas by the recent programme of special lectureships in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union has been largely negated by the conflicting pressures to which HEIs are subject.

Types of output

As was the case in the assessment criteria of other panels within the area of language-based studies, a number of types of output were designated as admissible "to the extent that they embody research". In assessing such work, the panel bore strictly in mind the overall RAE definition of research, and gave low scores to work which could not be clearly seen to meet it. The panel is confident that it was right in so doing. Nevertheless it is aware that much of the material in this category, especially language teaching materials designed to make some of the lesser known languages accessible to native speakers of English, meets a very real need. It is also aware that the production of such material has to be entrusted to experts with knowledge not only of the languages themselves, but also of the pedagogic needs and approaches of potential learners. The panel feels that further thought needs to be given to the question of the way in which research *might* be deemed to be embodied in work of this kind, whether, indeed, basic language teaching material can ever meet the RAE definition, so that researchers who decide to devote time to its production can be aware of the likely consequences for RAE assessment. To a lesser extent the same considerations have a bearing on such outputs as translations.

Age distribution of researchers

The age distribution of the researchers whose work was under consideration gives rise to considerable anxiety. Despite the substantial numbers of premature retirements that have taken place in recent years, over one third of the researchers entered in RAE 2001 will have retired in ten years' time. Less than one third are currently aged under forty. At the same time it is noticeable that many institutions have only very small

cohorts of postgraduates, and only two universities have research students in at all significant numbers. The panel is seriously concerned that it may be impossible, over the next decade, to replace retiring staff with new entrants to the profession. In this respect the panel wholeheartedly endorses the main findings of the British Academy's recent Review of Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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