

Overview Report of Panel 55: Iberian Languages and Literatures

The overview report of Panel 55 represents the thoughts and views of the whole panel, and each panel member has contributed to its elaboration.

These views stem from the fact that each panel member read and commented on every submission (except, of course, their own) and the Panel collectively read all of the cited research outputs, with between 25% and 33% of these being read by more than one panel member. Again, panel members were expressly excluded from reading material from their own institutions.

RA0/1:

Some institutions made serious errors by including staff in Category A who were retired or who had no publications; in some few cases, staff were included with no publications while others were excluded although they had publications (a fact mentioned in the submission itself). Although a few institutions returned staff under Category C when there was no evidence of their participation in the research culture of the unit concerned (in some cases, for example, because they lived abroad), others did show the valuable contribution being made by such staff.

RA2:

Those panel members who had served in 1996 and could thus compare the quality of the research outputs submitted in 1996 and those submitted in 2001, were able to say with confidence that there has been a noticeable and very welcome improvement in the overall quality of the research submitted in 2001. Work of international quality was to be found in almost every submission, alongside a large amount of work of national quality. Work graded as sub national in quality made up a small proportion of the cited outputs overall, although in a small number of submissions it constituted a large proportion of the total outputs submitted.

In general, the Panel was impressed by the quality of the work completed over the assessment period and by the range of approaches and areas of research. The main area of research in Iberian Languages and Literatures is no longer exclusively or even substantially literary criticism; much work that the Panel read dealt with historical and cultural studies, and there has been a significant move into interdisciplinary work. Most publications incorporated in varying amounts literary/critical/cultural theory, many in a highly sophisticated way. The Panel was pleased therefore to note that it had managed to anticipate these trends and that its composition included those competent to assess such work.

On the negative side, there was a fair amount of material that was potentially excellent but that could have done with some reworking and polishing. The Panel felt that at times there had been a rush to publish and that work had been published before it was entirely completed, with the line of argument not fully followed through. Although this affected some younger colleagues, who had perhaps been put under too much pressure to build up a portfolio of publications too quickly, more experienced colleagues were not exempt from the problem. The Panel would suggest that in future colleagues, particularly senior members of staff, should read each other's work and offer critical advice about the inclusion or exclusion of outputs for RAE.

In some cases of staff with recognised international reputations, it did not seem to the members of the Panel that the most appropriate outputs had always been selected. In a few cases where staff returned fewer than four outputs, no adequate explanation was offered, even though the Panel's criteria asked for such explanation. The Panel was thus left to draw its own conclusions as to the reason for the shortfall.

Institutions should consider in future the role and inclusion or exclusion of their Category C staff. The short weight and poor quality of the outputs of some Category C staff had an adverse effect on the grading of the institutions concerned. Unless institutions are confident that the work of their Category C staff is of international quality and that their role in the department and its research culture is clear and demonstrable, then there is little point including such staff in the submission, since they cannot affect the funding achieved but can affect the grade.

In spite of these negatives, however, the quality of research activity taking place in UK departments that submitted to Panel 55 was impressive, and demonstrated how hard our colleagues had worked over the last five years.

RA3:

As regards the discipline as a whole, there were an impressive number of postgraduate students recruited during the assessment period, evidence, hopefully, of the future buoyancy of the subject. Equally impressive was the range of funding that many units had secured for their postgraduates. Nonetheless, this should not obscure the fact that funding for postgraduates in the Humanities is a major national problem, and those postgraduates who are not awarded AHRB or institutional grants are having difficulty completing. Furthermore, although most units showed evidence of postgraduate recruitment, it was clear that the largest numbers were concentrated in no more than five or six institutions. Postgraduate completion rates varied enormously across the country, and it was in fact often those units with the largest concentrations of postgraduates that had the best completion rates.

The Panel sometimes found it difficult to disentangle the figures contained in RA3, and there is a serious problem (for HEFCE) in the lack of consistent figures in the returns of registrations and completions for Master's degrees, especially in the case of MPhil in European Literatures or other degrees involving more than one language. As it stands, it is hard, if not impossible, for a unit to ensure that all its MPhil students get properly counted.

RA4:

Not surprisingly, the figures for research income were not all contained in this section of the return; often more income was mentioned in RA6 than was shown by institutions under RA4. It would certainly help panels if all research income, from whatever source, could be shown under one heading.

As was to be expected, the amount of research income gained by units in internal and external competition was much higher than in 1996 and provided clear evidence of the effect that AHRB and other bodies are having on the discipline. However, although noting, positively, the securing of such income, the Panel was also keen to recognise the efforts and success of the single scholar who often does not need large amounts of research income in order to carry out research of the highest quality. The Panel hope that this balance will be maintained in the future.

RA5:

Inevitably, as one RAE follows another, the institutional 'quality' of the textual parts of the submission improves and there is a deadening sameness about many of the submissions in this respect. It was also noticeable that the general institutional statements about resources and research culture often contradicted what was said in RA6 by the units themselves. At times there was considerable exaggeration in the description of the range and depth of Iberian Studies in particular departments, and some departments would probably have benefited from having a tougher word limit imposed on them. Furthermore, the statements about research strategy were not always as coherent as they might have been. The Panel made every effort to check the claims made in RA5 and RA6 against the rest of the submission and was concerned to note that in some cases there was a marked mismatch between what was claimed in RA5 and what was evident elsewhere. Departments did not help themselves by doing this, nor did the Panel appreciate being told in some submissions what to think and what judgements to come to: the Panel was perfectly capable of recognising and judging quality where it existed.

On a positive note, the Panel was struck by the wealth of research activities going on in many departments and mentioned in RA5 and RA6. This certainly bodes well for the future of Hispanic Studies in the UK.

RA6:

Although the section on peer esteem was generally useful and informative, there were at times excessive claims about the international status of a number of staff or their supposed impact on the discipline. Where such staff were young colleagues, recently recruited, such claims could only be met with a certain scepticism from the Panel.

Conclusion:

It is gratifying to record the real advances made by a majority of Iberian Studies units during the assessment period. Only in a handful of cases did the Panel note any slippage from the previous standard of performance by the units concerned. It was, however, clear to the Panel that institutional support was absolutely necessary for a unit to do well, no matter how enterprising or hard-working the individual researchers. Some institutions had undoubtedly provided real support to their units –in the form of additional staff, generous provision for study leave, resources for conference attendance and research trips, etc–, others however seemed to have left their units to get by as best they could, with little or no real support or investment. Such units are clearly struggling, especially in a situation where undergraduate recruitment to the subject continues to grow apace.

The Panel was especially pleased to note the excellent performance of some new units created since 1996. The Panel hopes that the institutional support that was necessary to create such units will now continue so that they can build on this initial promise.

All in all, Iberian Languages and Literatures is in a healthy position and continues to make real improvements from one RAE to the next. There has been a gratifying number of new appointments, which, in some cases, has revitalised some existing small departments, and, overall, most departments have a healthy age profile. The discipline now embraces a wide range of research areas and many units have succeeded in adding new, innovative areas to their portfolio without sacrificing more traditional ones. Many of the smaller units have decided, perhaps sensibly, to concentrate their efforts in a small and well-defined range of research areas, areas in which they are already making an impact at both national and international level. It is to be hoped, however, for the benefit of the discipline at large, that the larger units will continue to research in a wide range of areas and thus provide opportunities for scholars from all areas of the subject. It cannot be to the long-term advantage of the discipline that large and important areas of research get squeezed out in favour of newer areas. Some departments have shown that both can be accommodated, and it is to be hoped that others will follow their lead. In the opinion of the Panel, Iberian Languages and Literatures will be the stronger for it.