

RAE 2001 Panel 57

Overview report on the discipline

1. Operation of the panel

The panel met for a total of 8 days during 1999-2001. 3 days during 1999-2000 were devoted to devising and refining the working methods in consultation with the discipline. During 2001 the panel spent 1 day allocating the reading of cited outputs and a total of 4 days (in two separate meetings) grading the submissions and then reviewing and finalizing the grades. The panel was represented by its chair on the Humanities umbrella panel, whose role was to co-ordinate activities and discuss issues relevant to the panels collectively. The umbrella panel met three times during this period.

As in the past, the panel read all cited outputs themselves or (in a small minority of cases) sought the assistance of other panels and specialist advisers. The ratings awarded were based both on the publications read and on the quantitative data and textual accounts. The individual ratings were supplemented by explanatory feedback in the reports to institutions. The panel regards it as crucial that these be communicated to the relevant departments.

2. The view from the panel

It is difficult to assess the totality of research activities in areas relating to the panel where several relevant units (in the areas of ancient history, history of art and archaeology) were submitted to other panels.

However, the panel was impressed by the overall quality of the submissions it received. There was an upward movement in the grades for the exercise taken as a whole between 1996 and 2001. This was in line with the national trend for the RAE. The trend within Panel 57 reflects several factors. The units submitting to UoA 57 have well-established research traditions. This, together with the honing of the discipline in the systematic rationalization of the late 1980s means that there is no weak tail comparable with those in many larger subjects; basically, units have to be good to be in the business. They have also approached the process with great care. Within the submissions, there were very few cases where fewer than four outputs were submitted without an obvious explanation in line with the panel's published criteria.¹ Finally, the overall quality of the research outputs submitted was of a very high standard and the textual evidence indicated strong research cultures. Intellectually the discipline is as strong as it has ever been. The younger scholars appointed during the 1990s are of a very high calibre. Competition for posts remains fierce, despite the poor pay and conditions in British universities. Increasingly this competition is international, a tendency already visible in 1996.

As in 1996, the RAE used the concept of international excellence as a discriminator for grading purposes. The concept remains contentious for Humanities disciplines (where inevitably serious scholarship participates in international debate) and the panel shares the reservations of its predecessors. This conceptual framework was

¹ Unfortunately, in a few cases this more cautious approach included a decision not to submit new researchers with few or no outputs, despite the panel's reassurance that it would welcome the inclusion of new staff, irrespective of the availability of outputs for RA2. The panel's stated policy was systematically implemented.

however underpinned in 2001 by a new feature, the appointment of international advisers. One advantage of having the non-UK advisers is that they offer a view on the discipline from the outside, essential if the term 'international' is to have any meaning. The panel was pleased to find that its conviction of the intellectual strength of the disciplines within its remit (not only in the areas of Classics, Ancient History and Classical Archaeology but also Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies) was shared by the non-UK advisers, who commented on the success of scholars in these areas in maintaining research of a high quality by international standards in an environment which makes unusually heavy demands (again by international standards) on academics. The advisers noted that this quality is widely dispersed nationally. In particular they pointed to the unique combination of teaching and research which marks out the disciplines in the UK.

Overall, the impression created is that departments now plan their research (including curriculum and timetable management, teaching loads and staff development, use of small grants, sabbatical leave rotas) in a more coherent way than in the past. A further significant development is the growth in collaborative activity. This is in part the result of the new opportunities for funding arising from the creation of the AHRB. As well as the small but invaluable sums made available to individual scholars, notably through the sabbatical leave scheme, for the first time serious money is available for large-scale Humanities projects. The panel does not regard collaborative research as inherently better or worse than individual research; the test must be fitness for purpose. But many colleagues have taken advantage of the opportunities to pursue ambitious and coherent projects which could not be completed by a single individual. The submissions also testified to a high level of seminar and conference activity. The period under review has seen some remarkably imaginative conferences and colloquia and some very distinguished collective publications as a result.

At the level of research method, the disciplines represented on the panel are increasingly theoretically informed. The permeability of discipline boundaries noted in the subject benchmarking statement is very visible in the research culture. There is both a strong cross-fertilization of ideas and methods between the disciplines submitting to Panel 57 and a continuing engagement in many areas with theories and methods drawn from other Humanities and Social Science disciplines. This development is inevitably uneven, and in some areas has been controversial. But the resultant debate has been healthy for the subject as a whole and has generated many impressive publications during the period under review.

In terms of research areas, the interest in Hellenistic history, the second sophistic, the literature and history of the late Roman period, in Byzantine studies and neo-Latin, visible in 1996, continues. Gender studies are less prominent than in the mid-1990s, while research in the area of reception has increased in volume and is generating work of a very high quality. The panel was pleased to see that key specialist areas such as papyrology were still being supported within the larger institutions.

With reference to kinds of publication, there appeared to be fewer scholarly editions, though it is difficult to know whether this represents a broader trend. In some areas there were fewer monographs being produced by senior scholars, though there was a substantial number of published PhD dissertations. Established scholars appear overall to be writing fewer journal articles and more contributions to multi-authored

collections. The panel had the impression of a significant increase in the number of such volumes. Though there is a widespread perception that the frequency of edited collections is itself the product of the RAE culture, in fact their quality was generally very high. Though publication costs and schedules are encouraging a trend toward more speedy and less expensive electronic publication, this has made little impact on the material submitted to the panel as yet.

There are several causes for concern, which no doubt apply to many other disciplines as well as our own. The lack of coherence in the approach of government agencies to accountability (with research and teaching separately evaluated, each in isolation) makes coherence at institutional and departmental level difficult. The drive to achieve high ratings has the potential to disrupt curricula and teaching support, to increase casualization and to produce disproportionate teaching burdens on junior staff. The almost inevitable institutional emphasis on cited outputs risks undermining serious scholarly activities (such as editing journals) necessary for the health of the infrastructure of the disciplines. The panel wishes to stress that its decisions were based equally on the research outputs and on the evidence for research culture and environment in submissions and that it gave full weight to such activities (an approach adopted consistently for two RAE cycles). Despite considerable variation across the system and over the period, overall the number of research students in 2001 is slightly up on the 1996 level. But there appears to be a heavy reliance on institutionally funded and self-funded students. It is likely in a period of high student indebtedness that the raw data conceals much individual hardship. Since the system as a whole is reliant on a steady influx of outstanding research students to generate the distinguished researchers of the future, the limited central funding to support postgraduate research in the Humanities must be a cause of concern.

Prof. C. Carey,
Chair, Panel 57