

Overview History, UoA 59

The assessment provided a very pleasing view of the healthy state of historical research in the United Kingdom. The Panel was very impressed by the quality of much of the work that it saw, and by the evident vigour of departments in a wide range of institutions.

The working of the assessment process

The task of assessment was very considerable. The panel was faced with a total of 7,277 research outputs. The timescale available for inspection of the outputs was short, and it was with considerable difficulty that the Panel managed to complete the workload to its satisfaction. The Panel had determined, as a result of the consultation process, that it should inspect at least fifty per cent of the output of each member of staff entered. It had been decided that the gradings should be based on the best work submitted (in many cases this proved to be the most substantial item), and panel members did their very best to identify this. This often meant inspecting all four items, and in practice panel members saw very much more than fifty per cent of the outputs.

Some material was cross-referred to other panels, as institutions had requested. The panel itself also identified and cross-referred some items that it considered more appropriate to other panels. In addition, the panel made use of external assessors. In one case, that of Russian and East European history, this was so as to provide expertise that the panel considered it did not possess. In other cases, this was done so as to lighten the very heavy load carried by some panel members.

The panel also received and assessed many items cross-referred by other panels. In some cases the panel felt that it would have been more appropriate had these items been returned under History by the institutions concerned. In a few cases, the Panel found that it did not have the expertise that other panels assumed it possessed. This was so, for example, with some works in mathematics, and with work written in Welsh on recent and contemporary history.

Non UK advisers

The use of overseas experts to review the Panel's initial grades was an interesting innovation. It was pleasing that all of the five non-UK Advisers were happy to concur with the standard of international excellence applied by the panel. The scholars consulted were neither asked, nor were they in a position, to duplicate the work of the panel; in particular they had no time to inspect the research outputs. Some of them wished to make use of criteria that the panel explicitly did not use, notably the proportion of research-active staff, the overall range of research topics covered by a department, and the number of monographs as compared to other types of publication.

One of those consulted remarked that 'These dossiers prove that historical research in UK Universities is thriving. I doubt whether any other country – and none of comparable size – can boast a research profile of similar quality and quantity'. This praise is particularly striking in view of the same commentator's remark that 'It is no secret that under-funding and under-appreciation by successive governments has left the profession demoralized.' Another noted that 'Despite all the difficulties that higher education in the UK has suffered, the fact that some units are able to renew themselves with outstanding staff, whose publication records are so robust, is very encouraging.'

The submissions

The panel was impressed with the overall standard of the submissions it received. Institutions had clearly put a great deal of time and trouble into preparing these. Plans for future research were, in the great majority of cases, realistic and attainable. Very rarely did the panel have the impression that a submission had largely been written by the central administration of an institution, with relatively little reference to the department. A few institutions provided refreshingly frank self-criticism; the overwhelming impression was of considerable pride at the undoubted achievements since the last exercise took place.

Research student numbers

The overall number of research students in History seems very satisfactory, at 1,873, or 1.08 per member of staff. Numbers were spread across institutions of all types, and it was a mere handful of departments that were not involved in supervision. It was, however, noticeable that in some institutions research supervision was confined to a relatively small number of staff. The scale to which research students have been funded by the institutions themselves was striking; the number funded by research councils and the AHRB was low. There was an evident concentration of research students in Cambridge and in Oxford.

Research grant income

The statistics revealed an interesting pattern of research funding, with academic staff receiving, on average, per fte over the assessment period, an impressive £9,870 from research councils (largely the ESRC). The average amount from the AHRB was much lower, at £1,446, reflecting the division of money between the research councils and the AHRB. Charities provided an impressive £9,938. Such averages do not demonstrate the very considerable variations that exist between institutions, nor do they reveal the fact that some types of history receive far more grant funding than do others. There is no doubt that the history of medicine (broadly defined) has been placed at a substantial advantage, when compared to other types of history, as a result of the funding available from the Wellcome Trust. The panel chose not to apply any simple formula to the figures for research income, in part because the funding levels were so much higher for institutions that had an involvement in the history of medicine. In some cases, departments indicated pride in the increase in external research funding that they had achieved, without realising that the level they had attained was in fact well below the average. Very few institutions had failed to obtain any grant income.

Institutional Funding of Research

It was notable that many post 1992 universities and colleges had made excellent use of the research funds that they had received from the Funding Councils following the last RAE. It was clear in many cases that the institutions had not top-sliced these funds to any great extent, and that where they had done so, the money had been spent on such purposes as the funding of postgraduates. It was also apparent that in the case of the post 1992 institutions often only a very small proportion of the overheads that came with research grants was retained by the central administration. There were instances where it was clear that these institutions had selected history as a growth area, and the panel's view was that this had normally resulted in significant achievements.

Research Clusters

The assessment criteria had asked for details of research clusters, 'where they exist'. The great majority of departments duly identified such clusters. In many cases it was very clear that these were genuine groupings, which assisted in focussing research and in energising colleagues. The panel did not, however, consider that it was essential to have research clusters, and in some cases was not convinced that those set out in the returns were anything

more than somewhat artificial groupings of staff on broad chronological or thematic lines, with little sign of collaborative activity.

The standard of work submitted

The quality of much of the work submitted for assessment was very impressive. Despite possible problems in finding publishers for academic monographs, a notable number of these were submitted, and work also appeared in a very wide range of journals. Inevitably, there were some problems that came to light. The panel had stated in the criteria that 'it should be noted that four items are the maximum submission. Equally there will be no automatic penalties where an individual submits fewer than four items.' Universities appear to have been suspicious of this statement, and it seemed that not all had accepted that it was not necessary to submit four items. The panel was surprised by the fact that in some cases items that contained little research were included in submissions, clearly in an unnecessary attempt to ensure that staff members appeared with four items to their name. In some cases members of staff submitted what amounted to the same piece of research in two or more papers, packaged in different ways, in what seemed to be an attempt to maximise the number of their publications. There were relatively few outputs that were considered not to represent research at all. In a few cases, translations into foreign languages were submitted as separate items, along with the original; having read a work once in English, panel members saw little point in repeating the process in another language. There were a few instances of work originally published outside the assessment period being submitted, on the grounds that it had been republished, even though changes were minimal. The impression of those panel members who had served previously was that there were far fewer trivial items submitted than in the last exercise, which suggested that institutions were, for the most part, rightly concentrating on quality rather than quantity.

Non-research active staff

The statement of criteria for assessment had asked institutions to discuss the relative contribution made to research by members of staff who were not returned as research active. The panel was struck, and in some cases puzzled, by the fact that in some cases institutions were at pains to stress that members of staff in this category were in fact actively engaged in research and were publishing the outputs of their work. The Panel hoped that this did not indicate that such institutions were automatically disqualifying staff with fewer than four publications.

Category C staff

Departments were asked, in the criteria statement, to explain the connection that Category C staff had with the department. This was not always made clear. There was a considerable variety in the number and proportion of category C staff included. In contrast to the apparent enthusiasm with which institutions omitted staff who, it was claimed, were doing research, they appeared surprisingly eager to include category C staff whose contribution was not always considered by the panel to be of notable quality. In reaching its conclusions, the panel took a considered view of the contribution made by Category C staff, and did not necessarily give their outputs equal importance to those of Category A staff.

Interdisciplinary work

The panel did not consider that it had any great difficulty in dealing with interdisciplinary work. History is itself a very wide-ranging discipline, and the panel did not have significant problems assessing work that took advantage of methods and techniques drawn from other subject areas.

New Staff

The 'old' universities normally appear to have clear policies of giving new staff reduced teaching loads, and limited administrative duties. It was not so evident that this was usual practice in the post 1992 universities. The panel considered that it was very advisable for new members of staff to be given sufficient time to develop their research effectively during their initial years in post. The Panel was surprised that a few institutions had apparently chosen not to include new staff in their submissions, even though the published criteria statement had indicated that such staff, within three years of the start of their first academic appointment, were not necessarily expected to have produced any published outputs.

Research Leave

The submissions provided the panel with extensive evidence on research leave arrangements. It was evident that, for the most part, it was only in the 'old' universities that there were established rights to apply for leave on a regular basis of, for example, one semester in seven. In some of the post 1992 universities much research leave had been taken, but this had generally depended on the availability of funds to buy in replacement teaching. The panel was impressed by the way in which funds from the AHRB and the Leverhulme Trust had been made available to increase the amount of research leave. The panel was in little doubt that the availability of research leave has had a direct impact on the quality of research. Those institutions that have instituted systems entitling staff members to regular periods of research leave have, in the panel's view, been at an advantage in terms of their research output. The enhanced research profile of some of the post-1992 universities may be directly related to the greater opportunities now available for research leave. In a number of cases, provision in these institutions was now more generous than in certain 'old' universities.

Future Plans

The overriding impression provided was that departments intend to build on the foundations established during the assessment period; there were few totally new initiatives proposed. It is clear that during the next few years many institutions will face significant staffing changes, as a generation of members of staff retire. Planning and management of this transition will be a major challenge over the next few years.

Development of the Discipline

The panel viewed the state of the discipline of history very positively. It is perhaps invidious to single out particular areas, but the panel members were struck by the substantial development in some. Early medieval history, particularly of continental Europe, is a lively and productive field, while the history of the crusades continues to produce impressive work. In broader terms, it is clear that has proved possible to sustain and take forward high quality research in continental European history, thanks to the funding available from the AHRB and other sources. The history of Russia and Eastern Europe looks to have been a particular area of growth; in contrast, there seemed to be less concentration on France than in the past. American history is in robust state; not only are there new scholars coming forward, but it has been pleasing to see mature members of staff bringing out major publications after lengthy periods of gestation. It is good to report that work of high quality has also been produced dealing with areas outside Europe and North America. There continues to be a substantial and significant body of work in gender studies. Local studies have yielded some publications of real international excellence. Medical history, with its exceptional resource base, has also produced some highly significant works, and its international scope is admirable. The broad area that produced most publications was that of nineteenth and twentieth century British social and political history. The development of oral history has yielded work of widely varying quality, some of it excellent. The panel did not have many outputs submitted to it that explicitly looked at the application of computing methods to history, nor were many databases

included among the outputs. At the same time, it is clear that the use of modern technology is helping to make evidence widely available, and that it has made important forms of analysis possible. In the great majority of submissions, economic history was integrated with the broad discipline of history, normally to the advantage of both sides; in two cases separate economic history submissions were made, for good reasons.

The next exercise

The Panel considered that the publication of relatively detailed criteria had been helpful, both to itself and to institutions. It hopes that it will be possible to publish the criteria for the next research assessment exercise as early as possible.