

REPORT ON THE OUTCOMES OF RAE 2001: HISTORY OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

1. The conduct of the exercise

1.1 The Panel

The Panel for Unit of Assessment 60, History of Art, Architecture and Design, comprised eleven members. Its membership represented the main areas of subject interest within the descriptor, and a fair spread of approaches to the discipline. Through the participation of Malcolm Baker of the Victoria and Albert Museum as a full member of the Panel, it also gained the perspective of a 'user group', the museums and galleries sector.

1.2 The Panel's mode of procedure

The Panel observed the guidelines laid down for UoA 60, as published in *Assessment panels' criteria and working methods* [RAE 5/99], both in spirit and in letter. Primary importance was therefore given to the outputs selected in RA 2, but submissions were assessed as a whole, with full consideration of the evidence of research activity and peer recognition presented in RA 3-6. In line with the published definitions of research excellence, the Panel awarded grades on the basis of levels of contribution to 'new knowledge and understanding, and/or to original thought'. Again following the announced criteria, 'no a priori evaluative distinctions' were made between different forms of publication: research quality was always the overriding consideration, whatever the scope or format of the output in question, and some shorter pieces such as articles were awarded the highest grades. There was thus no advantage to be gained by publishing research at greater length, or spread across more outputs, than its intellectual content appeared to justify.

1.3 Examination of outputs in RA 2

An average of 93% of outputs in each submission was 'examined in detail', that is, read thoroughly, far exceeding the provision of 'not less than two thirds' promised in RAE 5/99. A significant number of the outputs were read by more than one panellist.

2. The general pattern of submissions and outcomes

2.1 Characteristics of submissions

There were 39 submissions to UoA 60 in RAE 2001, as compared with 47 in 1996. The work of 372 [full-time equivalent] Category A and A* active researchers was submitted, together with that of 37 Category C staff, giving a total of 1,495 outputs. In most cases, there were signs of greater selectivity in decisions as to which researchers to include than was the case in 1996. In accordance with the published general criteria for RAE 2001, the proportion of departmental staff represented in submissions did not enter into consideration as a positive or negative factor in the Panel's assessment of them. The age profile of selected groups varied considerably, but with an understandable bias towards more established researchers. Nevertheless, the Panel welcomed evidence, where it existed, of a policy of recruiting younger researchers and supporting them in the inception of their research careers.

2.2 General outcomes of RAE 2001

The results for UoA 60 in RAE 2001 show a marked shift upwards in the average level of performance measured by the rating scale, when compared with the results in 1996. This is broadly in line with the outcomes for other Units, and indicates a real improvement in the quality of research across the HE sector. The reasons for this improvement are complex, but

may include the greater availability of research funding from previous RAEs. Arts and Humanities disciplines are, furthermore, beginning to gain benefits from AHRB funding, comparable with those that other groups of disciplines have long derived from the Research Councils. In the case of the History of Art, Architecture and Design, there was also a tendency for those HEIs which received low ratings in 1996 either to submit to other UoAs, or not to submit at all, in 2001, and this withdrawal in itself pushed up the grade average. The greater selectivity mentioned above was another factor in the overall level of performance registered by RAE 2001.

The picture that emerged was of a high level of achievement of varied kinds spread across the HE sector, not all of it in long-established departments and institutions. There was no indication that larger groups necessarily have an advantage in building a sustainable research culture. Nor does institutional or geographical location *per se* appear to be a strong factor in the attainment of research excellence.

While ‘centres of excellence’ emerged, there were also many cases of individuals producing research outputs of international quality within groupings which did not attain that level overall. This has often been signalled in the confidential reports to HEIs, with an indication of the outstanding subject areas. However, the Panel for UoA 60, in common with many others, decided that it would be inappropriate to use the public ‘flagging’ system in such instances, as this system can only be easily applied in cases of large groups with well-defined sub-areas.

2.3 The profile of ratings

The Panel’s assessments, undertaken without preconception, produced a profile of results in which about 38% of all HEIs gained 5 or 5* ratings; about 21% gained 4; about 21% a 3a; 13% a 3b, and only 8% a 2. However, within this broad pattern there were some distinctive features. Firstly, only one HEI was awarded a 5*, as compared with three in 1996. Secondly, there was more movement up and down the rating table than appears in a comparison of the outcomes of RAE 1996 with those of 1992. When the results for 2001 are compared with those for 1996 [disregarding HEIs that only submitted to UoA 60 in one or other of those RAEs], it appears that only nine institutions gained the same rating on both occasions. Seventeen HEIs have improved their ratings in 2001, in eight cases by two or more points, while ten have been awarded a lower rating than in 1996.

3. The characteristics and qualities of the submitted research

3.1 Parameters of research

The work submitted in RA 2 very largely dealt with subjects that fell easily within the descriptor for UoA 60. Interdisciplinarity is the norm rather than the exception in current work on visual culture, and posed few problems for the Panel. Work in film history and critical writing on contemporary art were both readily accommodated. However, outputs relating to the conservation of objects and paintings were referred to specialist advisers. A small number of publications were cross-referred to other Units of Assessment. Conversely, much work was cross-referred to the Panel for UoA 60 by other Units, notably by UoA 64, Art and Design.

3.2 Forms of publication

The selected outputs were generally conventional publications, whether monographs, articles in periodicals or essays in thematic, edited collections. The latter are a particularly widespread genre at present, often deriving from conference papers. At their best, such collections prove the value of conferences and other forms of collaboration in encouraging innovatory thought and creative dialogue between the contributors, and confirm the importance of editorship as a form of scholarly activity. Some of the other formats and modes of research output specifically admitted to RAE 2001, for example electronic publications and curatorship [as distinct from exhibition catalogues etc.], were little in evidence. It is hoped that curatorship, in particular, will become a more firmly established feature of any future assessments of research, with scope for the full preparation and presentation of data. [See also 4.4].

3.3 Subject emphases

Research into the history of Western art and visual culture predominated. It was disappointing to see less work on the arts of the ancient world and the mediaeval period, and of cultures beyond Europe, although there were a number of studies of Latin American art forms. Analysis of submissions suggests, moreover, that work on African, Asian and indigenous American arts is concentrated in relatively few research groups across the HE sector, and in many cases such groups were also making the leading contributions to studies of issues relating to cultural difference and interaction.

As regards the study of Western art forms, there was more attention to the history of fine art than to the history of design, of modern architecture or of film, although some work in these fields may have been directed to other Units of Assessment. The Panel was, however, encouraged to see a small but significant increase in submissions which convincingly placed film studies within the context of an art history programme.

Within the field of art history, there was an emphasis on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the modern and contemporary periods, with fewer books or articles on subjects drawn from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the culture of the Italian Renaissance continues to draw scholars, German, Dutch, Flemish and Spanish art of those periods was relatively neglected in submissions to UoA 60. The corollary of this trend is a growing interest in aspects of British art. Even the many studies in areas such as gender and postcolonialism tend to deal with anglophone cultures, or to use sources written in, or translated into, English. It may be that limitations in knowledge of other languages are now adversely affecting the range of research which is being undertaken in British universities. However, there were a number of studies of the arts of eastern European countries in the modern period. Studies in the history of sculpture, particularly in Britain and France, have increased significantly, perhaps fostered by the availability of funding and the initiation of survey projects. These works included both important books on individual sculptors and broader studies of public and monumental sculpture.

3.4 Methodologies

There was a very wide variety of methodologies in the selected publications, often even within those of one group of researchers. Genres of research ranged from the classic monograph or catalogue raisonné, together with technical studies of particular media, to works of a more speculative sociopolitical, psychoanalytic or otherwise theoretical character. However, this pluralism was not generally accompanied by the hostile polemic or entrenched positions of earlier decades, nor were particular approaches necessarily associable with different kinds of institutions. Across the range of universities there is a willingness to adopt

adventurous cross-disciplinary methods and new approaches to visual culture, including fields which have previously been little researched. Studies of earlier periods of art often benefit from the insights developed by modernists, for example in a consciousness of the role of gender in the formation of cultural values. It is clear, furthermore, that monographs on individual artists have themselves been reconfigured in many cases: a re-engagement with the notion of artistic agency, together with a new historical awareness of the significance of conditions and materials of production, complement the general concern with reception and consumption of works of art. To applaud these trends is not to undervalue research conducted within more traditional modes, and on canonical subjects. The Panel rated every research output in the light of its intellectual excellence and contribution to knowledge or understanding, irrespective of its kind.

4. The characteristics and qualities of the general research culture

4.1 Qualities of successful research cultures

The evidence of the wider research culture of groups, as presented in RA 3 to 6, was a significant factor in the final rating of submissions. Here there was, as would be expected, a divergence in the priorities and emphases of the units concerned, particularly in the extent to which researchers operated solely as individuals, or were grouped on the basis of their common preoccupations and engagement in collaborative projects. In some cases, such groupings, as represented in submissions, seemed more aspirational than actual, or involved over-ambitious plans for designated research centres. The Panel did not base its evaluative judgements on any criterion of collectivity, nor on the presence of clusters of subject expertise. However, effective leadership, genuine and coherent strategic planning, mutual intellectual support and constructive debate between colleagues were certainly positive factors in assessment. Research ethos was evaluated essentially on the basis of the intellectual energy and activity that were evident across a group. These qualities might be gauged not only through productivity in authorship, but also through undertakings such as the organisation of research seminars and conferences; partnerships with external bodies; and editorial, consultative or other professional activities.

4.2 Postgraduate students

The strength of the postgraduate culture was also deemed to be an important aspect of the research ethos. This was measured [proportionally to the number of researchers] by the level of recruitment of students, the level of successful completions of PhDs, and the award of studentships. Consistency or improvement in these respects over the review period was taken as a positive indicator. The Panel also looked for evidence of a well-organised provision for postgraduates, for example through systematic support and training; the creation of a stimulating and well-resourced environment; and opportunities afforded to students to present their work, and to participate in research activities such as publication and the organisation of exhibitions. These factors were judged as being equally important in the case of provision for part-time students.

There was a surprising degree of variation in the levels of success of groups in creating and sustaining a postgraduate community. While 'old' universities have obvious advantages in attempting to attract students of high calibre, by no means all groups in such universities had a good record of recruitment of postgraduates, or award of PhDs. The pattern of supervisions, moreover, often showed considerable fluctuations across research groups, with a few individuals sometimes making a disproportionate contribution to the totals.

4.3 Grant awards

The ability to win major awards for individual or institutional projects was another measure of purposive enterprise and peer esteem. The Panel was always aware of the potential advantages of established status, large groupings and mature institutional arrangements for supporting funding applications, in gaining external awards. However, success in this respect, like the existence of a strong postgraduate community, was not peculiar to any one type of institution. In crediting such success, the Panel had regard to the evidence of how effectively the available resources were being used to support particular projects, and to the quality of the work being produced as a result. The articulation of a policy for the direction and development of such funded projects was important here.

4.4 Curatorship and exhibitions

Links with external bodies proved to be an important aspect of research cultures, especially those partnerships with museums which led to the promotion of research through curatorial activities. Many groups have a distinguished record in initiating and researching exhibitions, and producing high quality publications associated with them. Excellent use is often made of the resources of local or national museums for research purposes. Groups linked to university museums, galleries and archives are particularly privileged, in the opportunities they have to undertake research based on the collections, and to stage exhibitions. However, submissions indicate that such groups vary considerably in the degree to which they appear to take advantage of these opportunities. In relatively few cases were university museum curators and conservators included in submissions as active researchers. Moreover, as indicated above [3.2], curatorship as a form of research output was virtually absent from submissions. In part this omission may have stemmed from the difficulties of presenting substantive material evidence of curatorship, in such a way as to gain the highest ratings for it, independently of any linked publications.

Such difficulties or uncertainties also pertain to the larger question of how far work linked to exhibitions for the general public may be rated as prime research. Exhibition catalogues are currently an important means of disseminating research, or may themselves constitute research of a high order, but their production may involve varying degrees of attention to the requirements of museums and galleries in publishing for a wide audience. The Panel, while always basing its ratings on an appraisal of the originality and intellectual substance of the contents, was sympathetic to the exigencies imposed by such requirements. It considered that the interaction between academics in the field of the visual arts and their large 'user community' was of considerable value, and would wish to encourage debate within the profession and the funding bodies on the questions it raises.

4.5 Evidence of peer esteem and recognition in RA 5 and 6

There was plentiful evidence of the esteem in which many British art historians are held, in the form of honours, prizes and major awards to individuals or groups; the offer of visiting professorships and fellowships; invitations to give plenary and keynote lectures at conferences and symposia, or to join prestigious consultative bodies; together with many other such marks of recognition. These were key indicators in appraising the status of a group at the national or international level, and as such were a significant factor in the award of ratings.

5. Conclusion

As has already been indicated [2.2], the outcomes of RAE 2001 provide very encouraging evidence of an excellent overall level of achievement in research into the history of art, architecture, design and visual culture in British universities. It is also clear that the quality of

publications, and, more broadly, the intellectual distinction, originality and enterprise of British academics in this sphere, are fully recognised at the international level [4.5]. Many of the traditional centres of art historical research continue to foster authorship and research-related activities of the highest standards. At the same time, much research of high calibre is taking place in more recently established departments, and in a variety of settings. Neither in subject matter, approach, nor current level of attainment in art historical research, is it possible to draw categorical distinctions between different kinds of institutions. The picture that is presented is one of development and change [2.3], such as to demonstrate the value of a Research Assessment Exercise conducted at subject rather than institutional level. The characteristics of staff profiles, and the differing scope and firmness of research plans and strategies, indicate the potential for further changes in the next quinquennium.