

RAE 2001 OVERVIEW REPORT

UNIT OF ASSESSMENT 61: LIBRARY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

1. Descriptor of discipline and working methods

As stated in the published criteria and working methods, the Panel expected to see submissions in those disciplines concerned with “the management of recorded knowledge, namely librarianship and information science, record and archive studies and information systems.” This was expected to include: “information communities and the use and management of information in all forms and in all contexts; all aspects of archive administration and records management; all aspects of information policy in the information society; information systems, systems thinking; systems development, information retrieval (including interfaces and gateways); preservation and conservation of recorded information, and the information industry (including publishing).” In addition the Panel anticipated the submission of research into the learning and teaching process in any of the above and, after considering the boundaries with other disciplines, “research that addressed information management within specific communities; studies of information issues from any disciplinary perspective.” The Panel established one sub-panel with the Computer Science Panel to assess submissions of research in information systems.

The Panel followed the published working methods, with all panel members reading all submissions received. Submissions were divided between panel members for further assessment taking account of subject expertise, with two panel members taking the lead in assessing each submission and its cited research outputs. The workbooks based on published working methods facilitated the ready and consistent application of the Panel’s criteria to all submissions and helped formally record the Panel’s decisions. The Panel aimed to read or otherwise examine in detail at least 50% of research outputs cited; in reality this figure was closer to 80% outputs. The Panel as a whole, in the light of its discussions and external advice it had received, finally agreed the final rating for each submission.

2. General comments on submissions

Overall comparisons with RAE 1996 are difficult, because a number of institutions returning in 1996 chose not to return to this UOA in 2001 and a number of those returning were significantly changed since 1996 submission. There had been considerable movement of staff during the five years, with more focussing within core departments. There had been a genuine improvement in the sector, not just upward drift or grade inflation, although a few submissions achieved a lower grading compared with 1996. The new universities fared better than in 1996, with an overall better performance. There was commendable evidence that universities, as a whole, are beginning to give greater priority to research and infrastructural support.

The descriptor for the Unit of Assessment proved a workable description and the Panel welcomed the broad-based range of submissions. Overall, there had been a significant shift in the balance, with less traditional library and information research and more information systems research. This was matched by a significant increase in integration of information science, information systems and information retrieval within submissions. This, the panel believed, demonstrated a new confidence in the sector in this being the appropriate panel to judge information systems research. There was less than expected archive research returned. The Panel anticipates that this will be a growing area of research particularly in the fields of archive management, as well as history of archives. The Panel took careful account of the range of disciplines returning and the different environments within which the disciplines operate but were able to treat all submission in the same way.

As spelt out in the published criteria and working methods, individual submissions were treated as a whole, with the Panel seeking evidence of a research culture as an important part of the research strategy. Most of the research cultures and strategies showed considerable improvement since 1996, with much more robust narratives and research plans. A number of departments had clearly followed the criteria and produced pleasingly high quality narratives, demonstrating a coherent and well articulated strategy. Sadly, however, some submissions seemed to have both ignored the criteria and/or lost direction, with the strategies being almost non-existent. Where a robust research culture and research investment was clearly demonstrated, this affected the final rating.

A number of submissions were brought down by their lack of overall focus and a long tail of subnational work. Other Panels, particularly those where the overall grades had improved markedly, noted “the intelligent return” of researchers, with little if any subnational work. This was not the case in UOA61 where, although there was considerable improvement since 1996, in many submissions there remained a long tail of staff whose research output appeared to have little or no research content. The discipline still appears to lack the maturity and confidence, compared with other more traditional disciplines, to lose this “tail”. There also remains a tendency to return quantity rather than quality. The Panel welcomed the greater selectivity shown in 2001 but would urge departments to much greater selectivity, particularly at the individual researcher level, and more focused returns in any future RAE.

In a few cases, there was a lack of clear research strategy and forward plans and a rather apologetic approach to research activity, with research plans lacking originality and dynamism. The narrative in some cases appeared to have little match with research outputs cited, leading to further concern about the coherence of the whole return and strategy. The lack of strategic direction, particularly where key personnel had retired or moved on and there was no evidence of new research talent being nurtured, led to lower research ratings. Even in a couple of the higher rated submissions, there was a worrying complacency and some concern for the future viability of high quality research.

There has been an interesting increase in active and focussed research groupings, effectively integrated within departments as part of the research culture. The numbers of new researchers returned in many of the submission is to be commended and gives some confidence to the sector in terms of the new talents coming through, bringing new skills and experiences and an overall cultural shift.

3. National/International excellence

International excellence was seen as the gold standard as assessed by individual panels, with regard to the best work being carried out anywhere in the world. In assessing whether work was of international or national excellence, the Panel exercised its professional judgement to evaluate the quality of the work. It took account of the extent to which the work advanced the subject, and increased understanding and knowledge. Consideration was given to the originality, impact, range, accuracy and clarity of the work. Originality was taken to include the use of new sources of data or significant re-interpretation. Work deemed to be of international excellence was outstanding in terms of almost all these qualities. Sadly, a number of submissions claiming to be of international standard had very limited research outputs deemed to be of international excellence, although demonstrating good, solid work at national level. At international level, there was no shortage of international conference proceedings returned but the overall quality was disappointingly low and many showed little evidence of research.

4. Research outputs

It was pleasing to see research improving across the board, although in some cases, not yet fully reflected in the research outputs. There were still too many regurgitated, descriptive papers lacking any research content and contributing little to the discipline. It was felt that some outputs should not have been returned, demonstrating a lack of management of research and lack of understanding of the definitions of research as used by the RAE. It is worth drawing the community's attention to the fact that it was not compulsory to return four publications and the written criteria clearly stated that there would be no discrimination between different forms of output. The concentration **was** on the quality of research content not the form of the output. Indeed the panel found quality of research output in many different formats and surprisingly uneven quality of work even in refereed journals expected to be of the highest quality.

It was noted that there were less research publication outlets since, for example the British Library, Re:source and the Library and Information Commission ceased to almost automatically publish research reports and this had resulted in a number of in house publications, with a potentially serious effect on wide dissemination of research findings. Research reports had often not been developed into substantial refereed journal articles and some submissions showed an over-concentration on returning conference proceedings, many of questionable quality; brief, lightweight and lacking references. The appropriateness and quality of "professional" papers was

particularly variable, with much of it demonstrating little or no research content; disappointing in a discipline in need of much stronger theoretical and evidence base

5. Research students

Whilst the numbers of research students returned was reasonable (total of 264), and there was an overall improvement in completion rates, this was not uniformly the case. There is still a marked distinction between the numbers of research students and the way they are integrated within departments in the old and new university sectors. Where the number of research students was limited, the completion rates poor, the spread of supervision amongst research active staff was limited and there appeared to be limited infrastructure to support research students, this was felt to affect the overall research culture and final research rating. There was concern expressed in some submissions about the reduction in the numbers of bursaries for taught masters and research studentships, in particular from AHRB. However, it was pleasing to note the marked improvement in the investment by departments in studentships and supporting research staff, through research assistants etc.

6. Research income

There had been an overall improvement in the levels of research income across the unit of assessment, although the research income returned for individual institutions varied considerably, with some commendably high levels of research income, from a variety of funding sources, and some disappointingly low levels. It was noted, in several submissions, that the traditional research funding sources of the British Library, Library and Information Commission and Re:source had declined, with worrying long-term implications for the discipline. However, this was partly offset by what appeared to be improved funding opportunities, via AHRB, in the archives sector.

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Chair of Panel