

Overview Report

The Research Assessment Exercise 2001 produced a set of ratings for Philosophy which accurately reflects the healthy state of research in this subject in the current situation of UK Higher Education. Half the units scored 5 or 5*, and no unit was rated lower than 3b. Thus these ratings make it clear that there is currently a very significant amount of research which attains levels of international excellence and very little research which falls below levels of national excellence.

The Philosophy panel, following its own published criteria, assigned the greatest weight to the published outputs cited in RA2. Virtually all of these were examined in detail by two members of the panel, and in many cases other panel members also examined them. The assessments reached in this way were supplemented by the information about individual staff achievements and circumstances provided in RA5 and, more particularly, in RA6; and these assessments were in turn further supplemented by the more holistic information about Units in RA5, 3 and 4. The panel's deliberations were subject to comparative commentary by other panels through the Umbrella Panel process, particularly during the final assessment phase and also the earlier criteria-setting phase of the exercise. The panel's provisional awards of the highest ratings were reviewed in the light of reports from four leading philosophers from outside the UK. The panel benefited from these commentaries, which have confirmed its confidence in its ratings.

The information which units included in the various parts of their submissions was comprehensive and clear. The panel found all of the material in the submissions most helpful .

On the evidence of RAE 2001, research in Philosophy at the turn of the millennium is healthy in its quality, range and depth. We have already commented on quality. As regards range and depth, there was plenty of good work in most of the areas which were specified in the panel's criteria (RAE 5/99 ♣3.53.1). It is worth remarking that in some areas the quantity of work was slight, even though the quality was good: examples are medieval and (non-German) modern history of philosophy, logic, philosophy of religion, political philosophy, applied ethics, feminist philosophy. We note this point for the information of those in the philosophical profession who may plan its future.

Although the panel was committed by its criteria to treating all units on an equal basis, irrespective of their size, and by the rules of the RAE to assessing the research only of those staff members who were submitted, the panel noted that in practice most units submitted about 70-80% of staff and that there was some tendency for higher ratings to be correlated with higher numbers submitted. Be that as it may, it was clear that many Institutions operated a carefully selective policy in deciding which staff members should be returned. To what extent selective return of staff should be retained in future RAEs is a matter for consideration following the completion of the present exercise.

Research in philosophy is very often conducted by individuals working on their own; but philosophers also benefit from working in a context that facilitates meeting and discussion both with colleagues within the institution and with the wider national and international community of philosophers. The textual commentaries (RA5 and 6) provided much evidence of successful efforts to promote such activities, of effective contacts with philosophers in many parts of the world, and of the esteem in which UK philosophers are held. There was also evidence in RA3 and 4 of a generally satisfactory level of effort and achievements concerning research students and the generation of income. The use and benefit of AHRB funding in philosophical research was prominent in the submissions.

However, given the importance of research by publication both in philosophers' own sense of mission and in the panel's criteria, it is clear that this currently remains the principal focus of research activity. The returns contained much evidence of large-scale and long-term projects, and also of activity of more delimited extent. The detailed information is available on the RAE web site, and this will enable those who visit there to inspect the nature of research in UK philosophy in the recent period.

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