

Report on UoA 65 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies

The submissions

According to RAE summary data, a total of 425 researchers were submitted to this UoA. Of these, 348 were Category A, 27 Category A*, 48 Category B, and there was one apiece under Categories C and D. Although we know that significant numbers of researchers were also submitted to other panels, Panel 65 undoubtedly assessed the vast majority of those working in the CCMS fields.

A total of 38 institutions submitted research to the UoA in 2001. In 1996, by comparison, 35 institutions submitted their work. On that occasion there were 315.6 Category A staff. The institutions choosing to submit to the panel on both occasions remained largely the same: 33 also submitted last time and in 2001 there were only five new submissions.

The total number of outputs submitted directly to Panel 65 was 1409. The panel assessed and discussed the total submission of each researcher and directly examined at least 70 per cent of the outputs, far exceeding its minimum criterion of 25 per cent. Each submission was initially assessed by a team, in line with the published criteria, and fully discussed in plenary panel meetings. All panel members read each and every submission in full and each award of a grade was the result of a deliberative process involving all panel members across all of the panel's assessment meetings. The sub-panel on media practice met separately and its assessments were fed into the main panel's deliberations. All mandatory cross-referrals from other panels were assessed and all requests for mandatory cross-referral from Panel 65 to other panels were met.

The stability in the pattern of submissions in successive RAEs reinforces the panel's conviction that there is a substantial academic constituency for whom its remit and criteria are entirely appropriate. Although the fields that come under UoA 65 are quite diverse, this is no more than the diversity that any panel in a multi-disciplinary field will have to accommodate. It is obvious that the creation of the panel in 1996 was essential and that its kind of expert configuration will be needed for any conceivable research assessment exercise in the future. Provided panel membership remains broadly-based and attuned to shifts in the field, there should be no problems in covering the likely range of work to be submitted in the future.

Panel 65 also assessed the work of other researchers initially submitted to a number of other panels. A small - but significant - number of institutions in the social sciences opted for mandatory cross-referral of groups of CCMS researchers. A large wave of further cross-referrals took place mid-way in the assessment process. In all, a total of 45 cross-referrals took place, the most significant of which in numerical terms came from Art and Design (UoA 64) and Sociology (UoA 42). Groups of researchers and some individuals were also submitted, most notably by European Studies (UoA 48), Drama, Dance and Performing Arts (UoA 66) and Politics & International Studies (UoA 39). The chairs of Panels 64, 65 and 66 co-ordinated their activities and agreed that there had been some dispersal of work on film, television and video as a result of institutional choices. They concluded that some

consideration needed to be given to how this dispersal across the panels might be handled in future.

The RAE team's summary data indicates that 320 FTE research students were in place on the census date (31 March 2000). Our analysis of the submissions showed that there were 545 research students in total over the five year assessment period. Fully-funded research studentships were certainly very hard to come by. Only 31 came from OST sources (principally, if not exclusively, the ESRC) and only 13 from the AHRB. Other sources were UK central government (with 16) and UK-based charities (with 8). These 68 scholarships were dwarfed by the 151 institutional self-funded awards and almost equalled by the 58 research students supported by overseas funding. Other sources - essentially, self-funding - supported a further 268 research students. The inevitable conclusion is that the vast majority of postgraduate work in CCMS is currently funded by the researchers themselves and also by institutions.

The patent lack of public funding is a matter of serious concern, not only because of the evidently positive impact on completion rates of securely funded studentships (and the concentration of these in relatively few institutions) but also because of the longer-term debilitation of the academic base that this clearly implies. The anecdotal evidence is that such gross underfunding has significantly undermined the recruitment of UK doctoral candidates to most institutions, despite the numbers completing their degrees in the period. Moreover, academic careers in the field are highly subject to competition by better-paid jobs in the media industries, think-tanks and consultancies, as well as other occupations. Data from the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service and other sources show that media studies and related graduates have higher than average employment records after leaving first degree programmes.

The RAE team's summary figures show that on average, 45 doctoral degrees and 6 masters degrees were awarded per annum over the five-year period. On the basis of the individual returns, we have tallied the successful completion of 219 doctorates and 36 masters degrees over the five year period, most of these being awarded in about one-third of the institutions submitting.

External research funding was low by comparison with other fields in the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. On the basis of the RAE team's figures, £1,573,923 came from the research councils. AHRB funding - at £188,042 - has only just begun to have an impact on research. It is noteworthy that OST sources were almost equalled by the £1,482,049 that came from UK industry, commerce and public corporations. UK central government provided a further £830,813, UK-based charities £506,419, and EU sources at £356,180 substantially exceeded the AHRB's input. Various other sources - both UK and overseas - accounted for £66,720.

In all, the field attracted just over £5m of research funding, which is low compared to other fields in the arts and humanities. The assessment process shows that the bulk of external funding is concentrated in a small number of institutions. The RAE figures also show that only 10 FTE research assistants were working in the field on the census date, an indication

of the limited scale of most external research funding as well as of the prevalence of individual research and of the humanities model over the social science one.

A recent report on research funding by the subject association, the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association, has also underlined how little funding reaches researchers in the fields concerned, and has underlined the difficulties posed by the unresolved boundary problems created by the overlap in responsibilities of the ESRC and the AHRB. The AHRB's contribution as a newcomer agency is welcome but remains very small; the ESRC's support, while substantially larger, was highly concentrated on a few departments with social science credentials. The consequences of this lack of research funding are addressed below.

Outcomes and scope

Panel 65 has assessed a relatively new field that is clearly making some significant progress. Since 1996, the field has seen a rise in overall quality as measured by the RAE and its grade profile was broadly in line with those of UoAs 64 and 66, the closest cognate areas. Twenty-six of the 38 submissions came from post-1992 universities, some of which have high achievements to their credit.

In 1996, no 5*s were awarded; in 2001, there were 2. In 1996, six 5s were awarded; in 2001 there were also six. There were three 4s in 1996 as against seven in 2001. There was a significant clustering at 3a, with five in 1996 but twelve in 2001. Whereas in 1996, there had been ten 3b grades, in 2001 there were five. However, the same number of 2s were awarded - 5 in 1996 and in 2001; there were six 1s in 1996 and two in 2001. In most cases, therefore, departments have improved their ratings, a testament to the widespread development of research cultures over the past five years and to improved research management regimes better geared to the requirements and expectations of the RAE.

In assessing the field, the panel took careful note of the range of work submitted, which straddled the arts and humanities and the social sciences. The panel welcomed work that crossed the boundaries of UoAs. It was concerned, however, that those in charge of some submissions had not read the panel's published criteria with due care and had sometimes entered work whose relevance to the fields covered by the UoA was questionable. For instance, a significant number of items submitted in literary studies were at the margin of the panel's range as defined by its criteria.

The panel was aware that the term 'non-research active staff' often did not reflect - and also tends to understate - the contribution such staff might make to a department's research culture. It was noted that numerous departments had opted to say little about the work of non-retired staff when in many cases this constituted a substantial part of a department's work.

By comparison with the 1996 RAE, there has been a growth in the volume of work submitted in the field of film studies. What the panel assessed probably understates the growth in this area, since some major departments chose to submit to other UoAs. Finally, considering its formative historical place in the field, only a relatively small amount of work in the social sciences was submitted direct to Panel 65, though some of this kind of

work was cross-referred to the panel. The social science research cross-referred by other panels was as focused on CCMS as that which came directly to Panel 65. However, given its relative paucity, the panel considers that the social science base of the field needs to be strengthened as a matter of policy.

At its best, the work examined by the panel undoubtedly confirmed the widely held view that communication, cultural and media studies in the UK produces work of world class quality and that this work has had, and continues to have, a major formative influence internationally. The international advisers' comments fully underwrote this opinion. International excellence was most significantly concentrated in the top fifth of the field but certainly also evident elsewhere. There was a substantial quantity, too, of research at a high standard of national attainment. As the grades show, the vast majority of researchers in the vast majority of departments are now at least consistently producing work at a national standard of excellence.

The panel fully appreciates the advances made in the field and hopes that the overall performance will encourage those working in it. These achievements have taken place despite the relative lack of funding from the ESRC and AHRB and equivalent bodies. In some key instances there has been a major investment of internal research funds by universities in the development of departments which has offset the absence of external funding.

Stepping back from individual departments' strategies and attainments, the panel noted with some concern that there was relatively little work based on serious empirical foundations. There was also relatively little major theoretical development.

Both empirical research and theory building are highly dependent on the kind of support that only research councils - or very generous sabbatical arrangements, together with other university resources - can provide. The panel was also concerned that there was a relative lack of methodological development and discussion in the field, and considered that this too was not unrelated to the squeeze on the time and scope available for broader reflection and to pressures that militate against risk-taking in research.

The panel also noted the small quantity of policy-oriented research. Independent work in this field for government or other major clients requires significant resources and it was noted that very little work of this kind had been conducted, meaning that there was therefore scant academic engagement in contemporary policy debates, either internationally or nationally. The panel considered this to have serious consequences, as much policy work is now carried out either in-house in government and media or by think-tanks and market research or other commercial organisations - whose staff are often drawn from graduates or researchers in the field. The crowding-out of academic research has become seriously detrimental to the quality of public debate. Only universities are able to undertake policy research that is independent of the source of funding. Moreover, such work does need to be properly hedged against direct pressures by OST or institutional support. Without these, it is prone to excessive dependence on those commissioning the work and their immediate and pragmatic needs. Although this may not appeal to the short-term demands of

commercial organisations, it should receive more serious consideration by governments and public bodies interested in genuinely independent inputs into 'evidence-based policy'.

Given its contemporary salience, it was also surprising how little research submitted considered the knowledge or information society and the policy issues entailed. Work on new media, too, was astonishingly sparse, given its public hype in recent years. Other contemporary policy issues - the present state and future of public service broadcasting, the changing structure of cultural production, the internationalisation of English, the relations between cultural policy and the nation - were relatively under-researched. Also of note was the lack of work engaging with the international media culture. In fact, work in the field was overwhelmingly UK-centred, which may reflect on both its limited ambitions and underlying lack of resources. Most work on the USA concerned film rather than broadcasting or new media; most work on Europe was centred on the EU and related to regulatory issues rather than media representations or national cultures.

A substantial number of outputs consisted of textual criticism. Aside from the inherent academic justifications of such work, the noteworthy concentration on texts might also be partly explained by the under-funding of research in the field. Textual analysis can be more readily combined with other academic work commitments than sustained or intensive fieldwork, which require significant funding to buy time out or to provide research assistance.

The panel was aware that publishing imperatives were also influencing the shape of field and the research and publication strategies being pursued. Empirical case-focused research, comparative work (where the USA was not a comparator), history and work centred exclusively on the UK are plainly becoming increasingly hard to publish. The academic monograph is in retreat whereas the textbook is in the ascendant, and increasingly specialised academic journals across the field proliferate in number.

Practice-based research

In its criteria, the panel closely aligned itself with UoAs 64, 66 and 67 to ensure consistency in the treatment of practice-based research. A sub-panel to handle this aspect of submissions was set up following extensive debate in the subject field. The panel had underlined its interest in receiving submissions in this area. It should be noted that despite this innovation, relatively little practice output was submitted and that the contribution of professional practice to the overall research culture of departments - in cases where it plainly existed - was not always presented to best advantage. In some cases, a conscious decision appears to have been made by departments or institutions altogether to exclude research-based practice from submissions. It is probable that this reflects scepticism about the RAE's genuine openness to such work and the fairness of the process, as well as caution by institutions. If so, this was most regrettable, for where practice outputs were submitted, the connections with the rest of the department's research were usually persuasively demonstrated. The panel wishes to underline that where its role has been thought through, research in the field is considerably enriched by the presence of practice-based research in the departmental culture and that such work was welcomed. Practice was submitted that could give a reflexive account of itself as research and this was in no way to

the disadvantage of those who submitted it. On the contrary, the sub-panel was generally impressed by the high quality of the work it assessed. That said, it was surprisingly common for submissions not to use the 300-word allowance to enlarge on the research content by explaining the contribution ‘through original investigation’ of the work to ‘knowledge and understanding’. This was also the case for other practice panels. It may reflect a lack of understanding of the criteria in institutions or a lack of clarity in the criteria: whichever is the case, this should be addressed again in any future exercise.

One issue discussed across Panels 64, 65, 66 and 67 was the distinction between professional practice and research-based practice. All the panels were aware that the distinction is not clear-cut and that there is high quality professional work that may not be able to articulate its purposes in RAE terms but which could contribute to a departmental research culture. Doubtless this issue will continue to be debated. The panels also noted that there was an increasing drift towards the submission of text-based practice research. This might reflect excessive caution in some quarters.

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Professor John Corner
Professor John Ellis
Professor Peter Golding
Professor Annette Kuhn
Professor Sonia Livingstone
Professor Angela McRobbie
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