

Institutional response from Central School of Speech and Drama

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1. Introduction

Central School of Speech and Drama [CSSD] regards as timely the re-examination of the fitness for purpose of the RAE. Following RAE 2001 there has been considerable anxiety within drama, theatre, performance academics about the definition of research. There has even been evidence of subsequent alienation from the concept of research. CSSD believes there is now an opportunity for recognising the diversity of research practices and rekindling the enthusiasm that will lead to the growth of the discipline.

In particular it endorses the steering group's concerns that research assessment needs properly to recognise collaborations and partnerships with organisations outside HE; that it needs to take note of value added to professional practice and impact beyond the research community; and that it needs to develop an enriched capacity for subtle discrimination, especially with regard to emerging practices.

We welcome the emphasis upon the 'people dimension' – the development of teachers and practitioners into researchers; and we welcome the proposal that targeted help is required to enable new fields to develop.

Our response is governed by three principles:

- a) developments in some disciplines can lead to new paradigms and practices, which may impact upon the very definition of what constitutes research, and that assessment needs consequently to be flexible;
- b) the previous RAE, with attendant games-playing, became a mechanism which produced alienation from the very activity of research itself: we need to design a system that encourages a new sense of ownership;
- c) properly handled a research assessment exercise can become a reflexive vehicle which makes its own contribution to the development of research through producing a refreshed engagement with research protocols.

2. Group 1: Expert review

CSSD believes that the assessment should be conducted by those who are experts in the appropriate fields, and to that end favours a structured expansion of the concept of expertise through our model (detailed below at 4. Self-

assessment) of 'competent readers'. The role of the peer community, especially in emergent disciplines, needs to be foregrounded; the usefulness of an abstracted expertise needs to be challenged. The peer community should be complemented where appropriate by representatives of user groups.

We believe there are two key factors here: the development of a discipline within a national context, as a national asset; contributing to this, the distance travelled by a research group in developing their research activity

Assessments should be a combination of retrospective and prospective, so that (as we detail at 4.) a submission may include the design of an experimental process that has not yet produced any other outcome (besides its design).

Assessors should consider the previous submission; the funding previously made available; the activities undertaken by the department or institution to support the development of the discipline nationally; evidence of the impact and significance of outcomes on external bodies.

Assessments should be made at the level of the unit of discipline specialism within an HEI (allowing for the fact that some HEIs are discipline specialist). It will be part of the work of the self-assessment (see 4.) to identify and justify the constitution of this unit.

The weakness of this system is that it may appear too open-ended, with too much proliferation of peer review. Its strength is that it avoids pseudo-scientific objectivity in the form of algorithms, and, by foregrounding discipline expertise, the assessment exercise itself contributes to the enhancement of the discipline in national terms. This can produce a much greater sense of ownership, and thus productivity, on the part of those being assessed.

3. Group 2: Algorithms

The suggested metrics favour some disciplines at the expense of others. Measures such as external income and research student numbers disprivilege arts in general, and emergent arts practices in particular. In a number of institutions (and not just specialist HEIs) some of the most probing and experimental work is done by students on 'taught' MAs, rather than by those registered as research students. The bibliometric measure has always been an irrational proposition: emphasis on the quantity of publications can lead to very shallow and thin writing; emphasis on citations has to live with the fact that it is often the most stupid book which gets cited most regularly since people get challenged to contest its propositions. Measures of financial sustainability again favour disciplines which are recognised by, and useful to, funding bodies and, specifically, rich industries.

For all these reasons CSSD believes that it is wholly improper to assess research entirely, or even substantially, on the basis of metrics. They cannot be combined to provide an accurate picture of research strength.

The system only has an apparent strength, an illusory promise of efficiency, minimum effort and objectivity. The manufacture of this illusion is itself a weakness. Others are that the system favours some disciplines more than others, favours that which is already in dominance against that which is newly emerging, and may transform academic research imperatives into economic ones. It will alienate and thus damage research practices.

4. Group 3: Self-assessment

Self-assessment is central to our proposal for a new research assessment which will satisfy the following needs: flexibility, to recognise not only diversity of practices, especially emergent ones, but also hitherto marginalized forms of research (such as pedagogic research, 'creativity'); ownership and sense of productive involvement by those being assessed; development of disciplines as national assets.

Rather than answer specifically the review's questions at this point, we submit our model for a self-assessment-based process (which will in effect also answer the questions).

The CSSD Self-assessment RAE model

- a) department/disciplinary unit submits claim to 'research excellence' containing
 - definition of what it assumes research to be;
 - research aims;
 - definition and description of research culture;
 - definition and description of research practices;
 - map of interrelation of the foregoing with other aspects of provision – teaching, industry partners, education partners, relevant regional policy and needs;
 - description of and rationale for the 'unit' submitted.
- b) Statement of material selected for submission (where the choice of what to submit is left to the submitting unit). Some of this submission may be outcomes, some may be process. Where process is submitted, an outcome/reflective analysis is expected at the next round. This statement of material selected to be correlated with items at a) above.
- c) The self-assessment submission will itself be one of the items assessed. It will be correlated with
 - Previous submission (how far has the unit travelled?);
 - Funding available (what has the unit done with its money?);

- Peer review of outcomes submitted in support of claim to excellence;
 - Evidence from external sources - user groups, audiences, partners, policy makers - relating to impact and significance of outcomes (e.g. reports, reviews, references);
 - Role of unit in supporting the subject nationally (units are funded to support the quality nationally and internationally of a discipline and should behave that way).
- d) The submission will be accompanied by a proposal with regard to assessment arrangements. It has been clear throughout the fall-out from RAE 2001 that nationally the discipline of drama, theatre, performance has been deeply concerned about the issue of 'practice as research', and the problem of turning what is necessarily an embodied event into a textual document. The performance document is becoming a genre in its own right. Thus the CSSD proposal allows for the submission of performances separately from documents. But these performances need to be seen by assessors. So researchers submitting performances will be asked to nominate a group of 'competent readers' from whom assessors will be chosen to visit the performance; to explain what these 'competent readers' will find original, challenging, instructive; to explain how the piece seeks to engage those 'competent readers'. This requires an RAE panel to be in continual existence. The activity of nominating 'competent readers' etc. is itself productive in that it invites the researcher to locate her/himself within a field of work.

The major strength of this model is its flexibility, recognising the deep anxieties in the discipline of drama following RAE 2001 and allowing for diversity, experiment and growth in newly emerging areas of work. This will in turn produce a sense of ownership of the process. The weakness is that the submission of the self-assessment could appear burdensome. But we would argue that the work of making the submission will lead a unit into a deeper consciousness of its own identity and a more thorough-going engagement with research protocols. In this way we believe that an assessment founded on this model will lead to a genuine development of the discipline.

5. Group 4: Historical ratings

The greatest danger in relying on historical ratings is that they preserve the status quo and become institutionally blind to emergent areas and groupings. In disciplinary terms it is not correct to say that the distribution of research strength will change only slowly. Recognition of the importance, for example, of impact on industry partners would lead to an instant re-distribution.

The greatest value in historical ratings is an emphasis on what has been achieved with the investment provided. By these means real growth points

can be identified and so too there can be consideration of a unit's role in supporting the development of the discipline nationally.

The weakness is that the system will produce alienation, marginalizing – and therefore not benefiting from - highly productive individuals and units in historically low-rated institutions. The strength is that a genuine measure of achievement can lead to creative use of resources, enterprising initiatives and enhanced productivity.

6. Group 5: Cross-cutting themes

- a) Funding councils should be more explicit about what the information produced from the exercise means. It can provide reliable management information but so too it can produce a sense of a genuinely productive diversity within disciplines. Pedagogic research may be more properly recognised if research assessment were correlated with teaching assessment. So too the disparities between RAE and AHRB/C assessment protocols need to be ended.
- b) Research should be assessed every five years.
- c) The best research is that which most develops the discipline at any point; it is also work that produces an enhanced understanding of the discipline, new cognitive paradigms. But the best work has no 'magic ingredient' which separates it out. Creativity, though problematic, needs to be recognised as a form of research activity that develops the discipline. RAE 2001 did not capture this. 'Practice-as-research' needs to be expanded as a category; process needs to be recognised.
- d) CSSD fully supports the idea that UK research should be benchmarked against international competition. Drama and performance in the UK are major national assets, part of a thriving creative industry. Exploratory research in these areas far exceeds that going on in, for example, the USA. Research assessment needs to undertake to maintain and develop such a national asset. Volume of research meeting a quality threshold together with strategic judgements as to national importance should govern funding allocations. Metric and historical ratings should not.
- e) There is no reason why every institution or unit should be assessed in the same way. Our model for self-assessment allows for considerable freedom, necessarily, without losing rigour (if anything it is more rigorous than that which preceded it). We have to beware of any model which standardises the sort of research deemed likely to rate highly: RAE 2001 tended to suggest that 'leading institutions' all produced a similar genre of outcome. The assessment needs to provide a 'ladder of improvement'.

- f) Subject communities should be free to define the most appropriate assessment. By this means research will be better developed, and the assessment can be more focused and rigorous. Standardising is unhelpful.
- g) As a specialist institution CSSD welcomes the panel's observation that submissions controlled by research groups may provide more objective results. It also appreciates, however, that institutions have a need to maintain strategic flexibility in the distribution of funds. We suggest further dialogue on this matter between institutions and their research groups may well be necessary.
- h) While we are not conscious of previous assessment reinforcing cultures that inhibit equality of opportunity, there is a possible argument that 'practitioners' and pedagogic researchers have felt themselves to be marginalized categories.
- i) The most important features of an assessment process are that it should be or do the following
 - Flexible (sensitive to full variety of research practices)
 - Enable full ownership by the research community
 - Itself contribute, through its own processes and reflexivity, to the development of research nationally.