

Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment. Association for the study of Modern and Contemporary France

ASMCF (the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France) is the broadest-base of the French studies associations in the UK, both in terms of its constituency (old and new universities) and of its range of disciplines. Departments in which our members work were assessed both under French and European Studies, probably with a slight preponderance of the latter. It should be understood that these are our initial reactions in what is clearly destined to be a long process of thinking about how to reconfigure future RAEs.

We take the groups of questions as identified in Annex B as the basis of our reply, concentrating on those aspects which seem most important to us.

1. Expert Review

Any RAE must be undertaken mainly by *peers*, as has hitherto been the case. While the use of outside experts may be helpful, there was in the case of our subjects a marked reluctance of such experts to come forward. This may not be unconnected with the demanding and poorly rewarded nature of the work.

The use of *non-UK experts* was a particular problem. Many of them, despite their eminence, are not familiar with the mindset of the UK civil service that is at the basis of the RAE and clearly found the whole procedure hard to understand. It is questionable if they contributed anything to the process. The above observation about the poor pay and conditions is also valid here.

It is very dangerous to combine *teaching and research in one assessment*. Although they feed and underpin each other, the criteria by which they are assessed are very different, and the suggestion is presumably not meant seriously.

With specific regard to points in **para 7**, it is obvious that existing *assessments are already mainly retrospective* (they judge what has been done, not promises about what x or y are about to do), while at the same time trying to assess the plausibility of ongoing plans.

The main *data that assessors should consider* is the output, RA2. All the infrastructure, planning etc is designed to produce a better output. Is research really deserving of the name if it does not have a clear outcome?

The present *level of assessment* is a moveable feast. It is sometimes hard to tell from a submission how many departments or pieces thereof are submitted, but in any case, in subjects like ours the main judgements are made about individuals or possibly small groups. The present format of presentation allows some flexibility and should be kept.

So should assessment by subjects, especially as French specialists can submit to more than one panel in any case.

2. Algorithm

In humanities and even most 'non-hard' social science, which is what our members do, metrics are fairly dangerous. If you measure the number of citations for a person, many of them can be negative. If you privilege the amount of funds raised (never huge in our subjects), it is possible for this to become disconnected from the output.

There is a danger that metrics can be used in an attempt to evade the judgemental nature of research assessment, on the basis that numbers are somehow more truthful than the opinion of x or y. The only problem with this approach is that some other x or y has selected which numbers are to be used in the first place.

If a future RAE in French were to be heavily metric in character, the result would be that massive energy would be expended on the concoction of statistics whose value would be apparent only to a certain type of administrator. We are not sure that taxpayers would like this.

3. Self-Assessment

The existing format of RAE does this already. HEIs are not asked to award their submissions a hypothetical grade, but the submissions themselves bid for this in all but name. Even if some extra paperwork were put into the submissions to allow self-assessment, presumably the Councils would still want to see them

checked by some kind of panel. And this means **all** of them in reality, since any HEI not getting the grade it wanted would appeal anyway.

Better then to forget about self-assessment and carry on with the present peer review, instead of making extra work for everyone.

4. Historical ratings

This is as dangerous as metrics, albeit in a different way.

What is proposed here is not so much *historical* as *historicist*, a logic which Popper denounced long ago. One cannot simply assume that because in the past there has been a progress from A through B to C, then the next step will be an automatic D; the cycle can just as easily go back to B. In other words, institutions go down as well as up, albeit slowly, as the document says. The only way to ascertain the direction of movement is by regular assessment.

5. Crosscutting themes

Use of RAE

It already is used as a management tool within universities (and presumably was meant to be?). The broad feedback given to HEIs is sufficient in present form to enable them to shape their mid- and longer-term planning. Under no circumstances should information about individuals be included in future feedbacks. This is against the whole spirit of the exercise.

Frequency

Some colleagues in Humanities feel that five-year gaps are too short. In fact the period for Humanities subjects is virtually seven years, which should give peers a chance to assess ongoing work.

Excellence

There is no precise answer to this question. It will have to depend, in practice, on the judgement of those commanding respect in the field. Panels went to great pains in their criteria to try and distinguish between work of truly international quality and the rest. But while one can refine criteria ad nauseam, there will always be a moment when these have to be applied, i.e. when judgement has to be employed. What is important then is that those doing the judgement have the confidence of their peers working in the field.

Distribution of money

The devil in the detail is criterion 3 'strategic judgement on the importance of the area to the UK'. Who makes this judgement? Not the RAE panels, or the professional associations. How does the government rate the strategic importance of French studies anyway? Possibly not all that highly, given its lack of enthusiasm for the promotion of foreign languages generally, as evidenced in its plans to drop compulsory foreign language learning at Key Stage 4, and, particularly, in the failure to develop a national languages strategy at Higher Education level. In any event, it is our view that such judgements should be made only after full debate and with a proper degree of transparency.

Assessment of all in the same way

Any panel member, certainly in European Studies, will know the frustration and the strong sense of injustice felt when asked to compare the work of full-time research institutes with that of ordinary university departments teaching growing numbers of undergraduates. Of course, they are not comparable. Perhaps there should be a different category for such institutes; if one were flippant, one might suggest that they be penalised for **not** getting a 5*.

Equally, however, universities would say that if they have found the resources to invest in such institutes while maintaining teaching departments as well, then they are entitled to the higher rewards accruing to such strategic acumen.

In practice it is interesting to see how close 'ordinary' departments can get to specialised research centres and in some cases better them. In practice, this issue is inseparable from the following one.

Strategic autonomy

Universities have been encouraged generally to diversify and develop their different identities. Their research strategy is surely a part of this process. University managements are the people who know what human and other resources they can deploy (many of them inherited from before RAE). They should be left to pursue the strategy they deem appropriate.

Equality of treatment

ASMCF supports the direction taken in the last RAE, where maximum allowances were encouraged for any circumstances that might be perceived as conferring disadvantage. Panels seem to have tried to act within the spirit of these dispensations.

Priorities

Future RAEs should be based on

1. **Peer review**, with panels derived from a wide spectrum of nominating bodies, so as to preserve the trust of scholars
2. Assessment concentrating mainly on the **quality of output**, while not neglecting infrastructure, etc.
3. Proper **administrative and logistical support** from the Councils. RAE 2001 was done on the cheap and it showed in places.