

Joint Funding Bodies' Review of Research Assessment. Response from the School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex

1. The deliberations concerning Anthropology during the build up to the 2001 RAE, and the decisions concerning what constitutes research of quality remain relevant and valid. In particular we are especially pleased that the anthropology panel took the view that edited collections were important to anthropology's comparative project. We also felt (a) that the panel did recognise collaborations and partnerships across institutions (e.g. between University of Sussex and IDS); (b) that the panel did take a wide view in assessing excellence in research (from 'pure intellectual quality' to value added to professional practice, applicability, and impact within and beyond the research community); (c) that the Anthropology panel was not overly focused on the discipline and did embrace interdisciplinarity. This is the nature of the subject.
2. Whilst RAE has generated an administrative burden, this is now much reduced due to the adoption of recurrent research management practices within the Department. Nevertheless, the burden will be much reduced the sooner the criteria for the next RAE are published, as the group will be able to present its own strategic planning in the language of RAE. Whatever the mode of evaluation chosen, it should be chosen soon.
3. Anthropology has many traditions within the UK academic community. This is one of its strengths. Departments should be able to achieve a high rating in relation to their strategic focus, and these may differ markedly. This means that there may be less need to discriminate further between departments, even at the top end.
4. The published findings of the research review were meagre. This can be predicted given the legal problems that might arise with more detailed reports. We felt that there may be ways to produce this level of findings more efficiently.
5. It is hard to imagine a system that does not involve expert review, and the discretionary judgement of a panel.
6. There may be some merit in assessment of teaching and research together, as this would enable more serious recognition of postgraduate teaching, and the integration of research and teaching. Yet the coincidence of two reviews at the same time may be time-consuming. Moreover accommodating the impact of two evaluation changes at the same time may render each less effective. We therefore do not favour this route.
7. We remain uncertain how an assessment can be prospective. This will play up the importance of presentation, and play down the importance of research of quality.
8. Bibliographic measures are not valid as an assessment criteria for the discipline. On this basis, LSHTM is the most important anthropology department in the country (according to the Guardian newspaper review of citations) - an assessment which was not borne out by the panel in 2001. Whilst agenda setting works are much cited, how much depends on the significance of the sub-discipline.
9. External research income is important for research, and thus is one good indicator of research activity. Care needs to be taken, however, as an excessive focus on research funding may lead to a failure to recognise how researchers 'self-exploit': i.e. undertake research in their own time and with their own resources, often without external funding. This is due to (a) increasingly competitive research funding, and (b) increasingly complex agendas and terms of reference produced by research funding councils/bodies, which excludes certain research areas and questions that researchers nonetheless feel committed to pursuing. Whilst 'self-exploitation' may be no indicator of a 'healthy' research environment, it certainly needs to be recognised. Linked to this, researchers at Sussex are increasingly aware that anthropological fieldwork requires external funding (e.g. staff time, travel). Yet different research programmes and questions within the discipline require radically different sums, and no simple calculus based on research income will resolve this.
10. Rather than simply consider research students numbers/completion, it might be useful to expand publication assessments to include those by doctoral students (for example, of those who completed within the assessment period) and indeed, those by post-doctoral research fellows and visiting research fellows who have been affiliated to the research community of the department. This would enhance the assessments' capability in taking account of the 'people dimension'; that is, to recognising the contribution made by institutions to the supply and development of researchers. We also sense that a focus on doctoral student numbers, rather than on the appropriate match of doctoral student to the specialisms of supervisors

and the offerings of the institution, is not necessarily in the interests of students. It has sometimes motivated departments to accept students whose needs and interests do not match what the institution and its faculty have to offer.

11. At the other end of the spectrum, there needs to be more attention to - and recognition of - those faculty members retiring over the period, especially (but not only) when they have continued affiliation and continue to publish.

12. Both 10 and 11 imply that there might be more recognition of those who have been part of the research community during the review, but who have 'moved on' (perhaps allowing a calculus of personal ranking x proportion of years at the institution). This would improve genuine assessment and generate less fear of turnover, and a less hectic round of RAE related appointments.

13. Issues of continuity of excellence would be better addressed through 12 than through any assessment based on past 'reputation' and assessments. Whilst track record and reputation are important to generate a thriving research environment, there is no reason to make these the focal points/end points of analysis. The data necessary to determine track record, and especially to evaluate trajectory, would presumably be similar to those needed for other forms of assessment. Historical data will not take into account the life cycle of anthropology groups, and the importance of young researchers is likely to be overlooked.

13. There is a clear need for self-presentation, although if this is to be externally validated, it is not really self-assessment, and should not be sold as such.

14. Whilst we have acknowledged the management information that RAE produced, this has not been central to our research management at Sussex, as we are aware of our own groups' and institution's specificities, and these are more important to us than country-wide information. As we understand it, this is a process in which we provide the information, rather than receive it, and RAE should not be sold as a 'management tool' for us.

15. We do not think that RAE should be linked to research councils. There is a need for some degree of pluralism and independence in institutions allocating research funding. Of course, data from research councils would be useful to RAE.

16. The time period of assessment surely must vary with type of assessment. A good type of assessment would be one that would be acceptable in a very regular way, that that would prevent the stop/start periodisation of research, but which was actually irregular. It would not be appropriate to have 'assessment on demand' as this would increase the pressure on institutions to 'play the game', and make the RAE ever more dominant in our lives and worries.

Of the qualities on offer, we would vote that RAE needs to be:

- rigorous
- transparent
- resistant to games-playing