



Vivienne Hurley
Contribution Review
The British Academy
10 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

29 November 2002

Dear Ms Hurley

The Modern Humanities Research Association is pleased to be able to contribute to this review, and we hope that it will lead to a more balanced and discerning appreciation of the role of arts and humanities in a rapidly changing environment. Two years ago the Association contributed to the British Academy review of graduate studies in the humanities and social sciences, and much of what was said there remains true today (letter to Professor Robert Bennett of 13 October 2000). To sum up: the Association is concerned at the current, ideologically-driven threats posed to the study of modern, medieval and classical languages and literatures by an explicitly utilitarian approach to language and literature teaching, where education is becoming synonymous with vocational training, and 'humanities' as a discipline becomes superseded by the vague and ill-defined concept of 'cultural studies'. The Association's views on the Nuffield Report of 2000 remain true today, and we believe that these views have been confirmed in recent controversies in British educational practice and policy.

In general terms, we reject the notion that arts and humanities should be explicitly linked to the search for economic benefit, as a false concept that reflects a partial and distorted understanding of knowledge. We would like to see a re-affirmation of the need for arts and humanities in a multi-racial, industrial and prosperous society that facilitate enlightened appraisal, objective assessment and judgement and above all understanding of both European cultures and the cultural systems and values of other civilizations, not just in the 'modern' sense but also in the past. These may seem intangible and perhaps idealistic objectives, but we firmly believe that informed and intellectually honest debate remain the cornerstone of any civilized culture.

In the short term, we also have concerns about the impact of humanities research on the community as a whole in the light of RAE priorities, in particular the perceived threat to collaborative and long-term projects. The threat to pre-modern (i.e. twentieth century) disciplines is acknowledged in the RAE review of its recent exercise, as is the marginalization of whole societies: RAE panel UoA54 on Russian, Slavonic and East European Languages, for instance, noted that 'the study of Bulgaria has almost disappeared'. We trust that the British Academy shares our worries for the future of an academic community where short-term political priorities dictate funding, and therefore serve to disenfranchise whole disciplines. Let us be clear: we are not against the RAE exercise as such; indeed, we are delighted that it has helped establish the quality of so much UK research. But we are very concerned at the distorting effects it has had, whereby whole areas of academic endeavour are under serious threat of disappearing.

We hope that you find our views, though forthright, are nevertheless of benefit to you in your Review, and are prepared to participate in further consultation, should you deem this desirable.

Yours sincerely

David Gillespie
Honorary Secretary, MHRA

MODERN HUMANITIES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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