

MHRA

Modern Humanities Research Association

Josie Linton
RAE Officer
Higher Education Funding Council for England

14 September 2005

Dear Ms Linton,

The MHRA has serious reservations about the RAE process which it sees, more and more, not as an indicator of research quality but as a managerial tool, a convenient one which allows managers to make hasty judgements about the relative value of different forms of research output.

In particular, in recent years it has not been easy to produce book publications at a time when the major publishers are closing down modern languages series. This is not the case, of course, for English, which is one of the modern languages in which we have an interest, nor indeed for history or cultural history, which is where many of us actually work. The tendency of some panels to value highly 'innovation' and 'theory' has led to a reduction in the production of critical editions, as Heads of Department and even former RAE panel members have warned young colleagues that such activity is not rated highly by RAE panels. Some modern language panels are heavily biased towards the modern period where critical editions are, in a sense, less critical for the discipline. The documents say that no relative weighting will be applied to different forms of output but the MHRA finds that very hard to believe. Nor can it easily believe that it is the quality of the publication and not the quality of the publisher which is important. Frankly, we just do not see how a small panel can read the vast amount of outputs in order to make valid judgements. Panels are surely relying on the reputation of publishers and of peer-review in journals to do much work for them. Although major scholarly databases are included in the list of possible research outputs, the criteria which will be used to judge such outputs are not appropriate - one would not expect to see 'innovation' or 'theory' in major databases or bibliographies - far more important are accuracy, completeness, clarity of presentation, usefulness.

In successive RAEs my Association has repeatedly made representations about the evident undervaluing by RAE panels of editorial work in general, of contributions to critical bibliographies, and indeed of the whole internal process of review. This has met with limited success, and led to the point where low-level managers in HEIs are, in pursuit of research targets for the RAE founded on a superficial appreciation of the fashionably "innovative", actually deterring their staff from engaging in such work, so that it becomes ever more difficult to recruit good editors and bibliographers from within our academic community. This is ironic, given that the internal processes of editorial judgement, review, and bibliographical assessment are the infrastructure of scholarship and fundamental to the production of good research, and to the longer-term future well-being of humanities disciplines, which the RAE presumably intends to further. This is a matter too important to be left to the arbitrary determination of individual subject sub-panels. Yet again we request

1

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that all panels in the humanities are required to assess editorial and bibliographical contributions on their merits on exactly the same footing as more superficially "original" work.

We read that for Postgraduate activity it is not 'mere volume' which will count. This begs the question: if not that, what? It has become increasingly difficult to attract postgraduates into modern languages - they see no guarantee of future employment and their services are much valued in the commercial world. Graduate linguists who, typically, have spent four years obtaining their BA are naturally reluctant to commit to postgraduate study for a further three to four years. Again, English is an exception because the duration of the BA is typically three years.

Of particular concern to us, and this was the case last time, is that panels, although of similar disciplines, are proposing different guidelines. For example, we read in the History panel guidelines:

'a. Engagement in a substantial research project where the research has yet to produce an output which can be submitted as part of the RAE. In these circumstances, the sub-panel expects an individual researcher would have produced other outputs, though in exceptional cases there might be fewer than four.

b. The scale, scope or nature of a submitted work: this covers projects which have required a significant research investment and which can stand in the place of the submission of two outputs, i.e. where the submitted work represents the equivalent of two outputs.'

There is no allowance in our panel for long-term projects - why not? Why should historians have that benefit and not us? How can HEFCE have allowed such disparity to exist?

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Cook
Chairman, MHRA